A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER—15¢

COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK Magazine

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NOVEMBER COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK Magazine

A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE

1

BROADCAST thru your radio TALK - SING - PLAY

BROADCAST your voice on programs coming through your own radio set—make announcements from any part of the house—inject wise cracks, Josh and mystify friends. Imitate radio stars, practice announcing, singing, radio acting, etc. Do a Bing Crosby, Charlie McCarthy, Jack Benny, Benny Goodman, etc.

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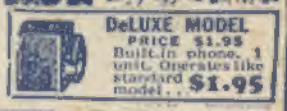
MIDGET POCKET RADIO. Price..... **$1.00**



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Tells how to make batteries, dynamos, motors, radios, telegraph apparatus, telephones, lights, electric bells, alarms, coils, electric engines, etc. 64 pages. 100 illustrations. Price Postpaid.... **10c**

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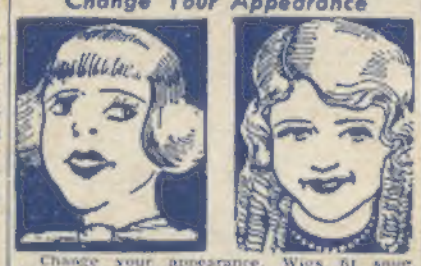

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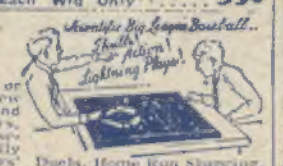

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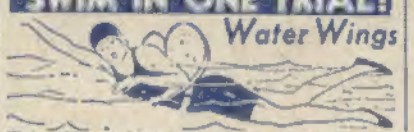

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COMPLETE

WESTERN BOOK MAGAZINE

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ON SALE THE 25TH OF EVERY MONTH

A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE

Vol. 11, No. 2 *November, 1938*

TWO BIG NOVELS PAGE

Gunhawk Trail to Purgatory.....by Ed Earl Repp 10

From the high scarps of the Organs to the distant Rio Grande, that ominous sky domed over Pecos Valley like a canopy of smoked steel . . . Were these awesome thunderheads grim portent of the flaming range war that awaited Steve Hale? Did they foretell a blood-and-steel grassland saga, in which a gunslung Texas would bullet-smash the devil's own vigilante committee?

Gunfighter Wanted.....by Nels LeRoy Jorgenson 103

Dan Ransome's .44 slammed lead three times, and three raiders hurtled beneath the trampling hoofs of those panicked longhorns—for though Dan had ridden with every renegade along the brimstone, he still wasn't going to watch kill-crazy rustlers dictate the destiny of Quicapos, his home range!

A THRILLING NOVELETTE

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The guts and guns of Vance Meredith could match the savagery of that Northland butcher—but Colt courage offered no shield against the treachery of a painted horde's bushwhack death!

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That venegeance-mad killer performed his first mercy act when he left Sheriff Dent thonged beside a cool, crystal spring—to die from thirst's parched hell!

The Devil Is a Backshooter.....by Allan K. Echols 97

Because a rum-soaked button was staking the toil-worn wealth of three generations on the fall of the cards in that stacked deck, Speed Stout threw hotlead chips into a flaming jackpot with corpses wild!

Hot-Lead Antidote.....by Sherman Baker 124

Though his lawdog faher's fading life postponed a bushwhack baron's Colt reign over that kingdom of lawless triggers, Jerry Custer alone could save the land from gun damnation—by sending Sheriff Custer into boothill repose!

The Winning of the West.....by *The Old Cowman* 8

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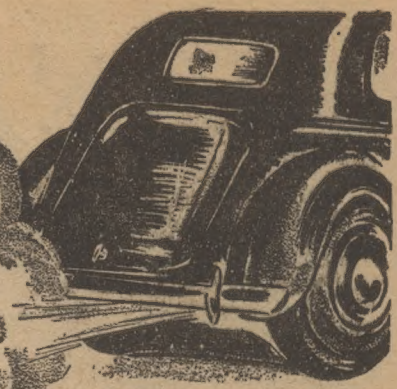

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THE WINNING OF THE WEST

FOR two endless days and a sleepless night Molly Whitlock had been bounced about in this northbound Cheyenne-Deadwood stage. She had come to this new western country from far away New York State. But it was not necessary for her thoughts to go back farther than raw, roaring Omaha for her to realize how completely her world had changed.

Her fellow passengers—a whisky drummer going all the way through to Deadwood, two Powder River cowmen and an army contractor bound for Fort McKinney—had been extravagantly courteous. But it was in their off moments, when the conversation was unguarded, that she overheard enough to fill her with a keen sense of alarm and misgiving. The army man had spoken of the massacre at Fort Fetterman; the cowmen had complained about the organized rustling; the whisky salesman had ridden on three stages in the past six months that had been held up.

It was bad enough by day. By night, the wild, savage tang of the prairies smote her nostrils with forbidding effect. Every sound and shadow took on a sinister meaning. Ahead of her, she knew, there were few settlements. Much of this country was still Indian country. Even the road they followed was no more than a pair of twin ruts across the prairie grass. And yet, to reassure her, were the letters her father had written. He spoke of Wyoming as being almost ready for statehood. He was a minister of the gospel. Within the past year he has established a church in Salt Creek. Molly was on her way to join him. Thinking back, she realized that her father had subtly tried to prepare her for the changes she was to meet. She had made many allowances in her own mind, but she knew more was to be asked of her than she had even remotely imagined.

But the stage continued on its way without misadventure. At Squaw Butte station a man was waiting for it. He was tall, lean and bronzed. He wore a peace officer's badge, and he introduced himself as Buck Ewing, the marshal of Salt Creek, there to escort the stage into town.

Molly liked the looks of him. He was soft spoken and sparing of words. His eyes had a directness and searching quality that made her feel they would not be satisfied with less than the truth. In their depths there was a patient wisdom that seemed far beyond his years.

"Is it usual for you to meet the stage here?" she asked.

"No," he smiled. "Your father suggested it, and I was happy to oblige him."

"There isn't any danger, is there—I mean we won't be held up?"

"Well, this stage has been held up," he said quietly. "That will hardly happen today."

Having him there, riding beside her, proved strangely comforting to Molly. Without appearing to, she studied his strong face. Even in repose there was something formidable about it; something that told her he feared no man. His mouth was not without a trace of hardness; but it disappeared when he smiled, and he smiled whenever their eyes met.

Wyoming Territory had suddenly lost much of its forbidding aspect in Molly's eyes. As for Buck Ewing, having once gazed at her, life had a new meaning. The whisky drummer had sensed their interest in each other. Thinking only to do Buck a good turn, he said, for her ears alone:

"He sure tamed Salt Creek. She used to be the wildest, toughest town on the frontier. When he pinned that law badge on his vest and said a man couldn't pack a gun in that town and live, there was some who didn't believe him—especially them with reputations as bad men to maintain. They changed their tune after Buck sent seven of 'em to boothill, feet first."

Horror gripped Molly. "Do you mean he killed seven men?"

"I don't mean nothin' else, ma'am!" the drummer assured her. "Seven men, and less than a month. And there wasn't a one of 'em but had three or four notches on his gun."

This was high praise, and from a competent authority, but it took the sunshine out of the day for Molly Whitlock.

In the weeks that followed she saw a great deal of Buck Ewing. She came to know, without his speaking, as a woman usually does in such cases, that he was deeply in love with her. Never once did she mention those killings. And yet, it was because of them and because she knew that if his sense of duty commanded it he would kill again, that she kept him at arm's length, denying the love that she wanted more than anything in life.

She was not altogether to blame. She had come from a state where life was old and well ordered. Inhibitions, stronger than she knew, were dictating her course. To make matters worse, a story, inspired by gamblers in Salt Creek, who hated Ewing, was going the rounds, accusing him of using his office to destroy any man who crossed him.

And then one day Dutch Eppler rode into town. Molly Whitlock had never heard of the man and was not even aware of his presence in Salt Creek. No one else was blissfully ignorant. Dutch Eppler boasted that his gun had a waiting notch for the badge toter who got in his way. He had been run out of Deadwood for bushwhacking a deputy sheriff. Up and down the frontier, his trail was red with the blood of innocent men. In the Territorial saloon, he made himself brave with whisky and sent out word that the marshal didn't live who could make him give up his guns; if Ewing thought different, let him come after him.

The issue was plain in Ewing's mind. He knew the element he had fought to a standstill had sent for Eppler. Dutch was there to call his hand. That put it beyond compromise. It was a showdown; law and order against the reign of the hoodlum.

Buck accepted it at those terms. He sent no warning to Eppler. The man's brag was proof that he was already warned. It was noon. For two hours Ewing policed the town, and Dutch kept out of his way. And then, in the middle of the afternoon, Eppler stepped out of the saloon and Ewing turned the corner and stood facing him.

Up and down the street, men froze in their tracks. Women rushed into the stores. Molly Whitlock stepped out of the hotel opposite and stood there unable to move. Like a foul wind a tension swept over Salt Creek and the air was suddenly breathless.

Buck Ewing's blue eyes, cold and unwavering, seemed to cast a spell on Dutch Eppler. For seconds they stood there, neither moving a finger. Suddenly Eppler's right hand flashed down and slapped his gun. It released Ewing. With one motion he drew and fired. The impact of the heavy slug seemed to lift Eppler to his toes. He stood there grotesquely for a moment, hands flung wide, and then tumbled forward into the dust of the street.

Molly was one of the first to reach Ewing's side. Her face was white with horror.

"Buck, how could you?" she cried. "That man's blood is on your hands. In God's eyes that badge doesn't give you the right to kill like this."

"That's between him and me, ma'am," Ewing said quietly. "I do not expect you to understand; you are new to this country. Our ways may seem crude and hard; but they're just. That man was a mad dog; bad all the way through. And he took pride in his badness. We haven't room for his kind, not if this country is ever going to amount to anything. You'll come to understand that some day."

Molly Whitlock not only came to understand it but to appreciate that it was frontier marshals like Buck Ewing, unflinchingly braving the guns of the desperados and bad men who were hurrying the day when the west would stand unfettered at the threshold of its greatness and glory.

The Old Cowman

What grim portent for Steve Hale lay in those awesome thunder-heads mantling the high scarps of the distant Organs? Did they foretell a blood-and-steel grassland saga—were they warning Steve that hell itself was riding Spur Rowel range, and that the devil's own disciples were preaching gunsmoke gospel?

CHAPTER I

TRAGEDY ON THE RANGE

FOR hours now the storm had been gathering, breeding like a festering sore over the high scarps of the Organs. From the Pecos to the Rio Grande the sky domed over the Pecos Valley like a canopy of smoked steel. Black, ominous clouds pitched and tossed restlessly in the high winds, stabbed by jagged blue tongues of lightning that played about the tall pinnacles of Baldy Peak. Thunderheads formed a forebidding mass that made an awesome backdrop down the Big Bend horizon. Blistering heat waves beat up from the Valley floor. Gusts of wind, hot, parching, whipped across the land, pungent with sage, creosote and the smell of distant rain.

Suddenly the sky seemed to fall in one gushing, snarling growl as the black curtain of rain splattered down from the hills. In a moment Steve Hale was soaked to the skin. He pulled the wide brim of his Stetson more snugly to his forehead and hunched his broad shoulders against the storm. Water cascaded from his hat, splattered over the withers of his plodding horse.

A loud, deafening roar of thunder, so

A GUNSLUNG TEXAN SMASHES THE DEVIL'S OWN VIGI-

Gunhawk Trail to Purgatory

by ED EARL REPP

Author of "Wild Bunch Wipe-out," etc.

Death seared along Steve's ribs, burned like a hot iron as Wyatt's first bullet creased him

close that it almost made his strong, white teeth rattle, spooked the horse for a moment. He felt the gallant palamino quiver between his legs.

"Nothin' to git spooky over, Shasta boy," he soothed assuringly. "Jes' keep on ploddin' along an' we'll be there in a jiffy. Ten more miles, old son, an' yuh'll be buryin' yore muzzle in Spur Rowel hay!"

As if understanding, Shasta shook his great head and increased his gait. Steve let him go, a grim smile on his weather-tanned face. He buried his head against his chest and contemplated his return to the Spur Rowel after an absence of nearly four years.

What would he find when he reached home? The terse note he had received from his father, old Bronco Hale, imploring him to return to the hearth of the Spur Rowel, had told him nothing, yet hinted directly at trouble.

In the same bold scrawl that old Bronco used on the tally sheets, the cattleman had written his wishes. And Steve had left California immediately to comply. Now, the contents of that letter, terse, hurriedly done, were uppermost in his mind.

"My dear son, Stephen," it read, and Steve knew every word by memory. "Your brother, Johnny, and me want you to come home. We need you, Steve,

as these are trying days on the Pecos and the Spur Rowel. Hell is riding our ranges and the Devil's Disciples are preaching gunsmoke gospel. Please come home, Steve, right away. If you can't come pronto or get here too late, I want you should go to that hollow cottonwood out back of the ranch house where you and John used to play bear and Indian, and find that old Bisley Colt's I gave you years ago. It will tell you what should be done as best as we know. With love. John Hale, Sr."

Steve Hale pried the innermost recesses of his brain for a definite meaning of that rather cryptic note. Who were the Devil's Disciples? What did they mean to the Spur Rowel?

It wasn't like old Bronco to write such a letter. It betrayed fear, worry, as if something had come up to sap the soul from the old cowman's body. And old Bronco Hale had been a tough man to frighten. But here was something different—the Devil's Disciples—Renegades, outlaws riding the Spur Rowel ranges? Steve was sure of that. Preaching gunsmoke gospel? He knew what that meant—death was riding the Pecos Valley.

Night was gathering fast, as if it portended something untoward. The storm was letting up, but brown, gurgling water coursed sluggishly along old creek beds. He shielded his face as Shasta spilled through the streams, geysering water over him.

Steve Hale was young, too young, it seemed, for a man of his reputation throughout West Texas and points west to California. He was big, narrow-hipped. His shoulders would have graced a wrestler. His leonine head, drawn down on a powerful neck, was one of character. Steel-thewed legs encased in clean Levi's that failed to hide rippling muscles, made him a man to be conjured with.

People were lifted out of their troubles by his contagious smile and free laughter. The few who had caused his lips to draw into grim lines, eyes to become amber-flecked and chill, were indeed lucky to live and tell of the gunswift of this youngster who was known from the Pecos to the Sacramento, as The Gunhawk. Few cowboys ever had his speed on the draw. And few men with that speed had used it to such good cause.

Steve Hale never slapped his holsters unless his life was in danger. And then the other man was given first chance. Those who lived grudgingly admitted being spotted on the draw only to be crippled in the gun hand by Hale lead.

Most men sought Steve Hale as a friend rather than an enemy. Women admired him for the man he was; men respected him for his courage and his gunswift. All knew him to be a friend of the needy, a scourge to the lawless.

Shasta slewed in the muck. The rain had stopped now. Toward the north a lone star winked in the scowling heavens between banks of tumbling black clouds. In the east the pale mound of the moon was standing on the scarps of the Big *Piñons*. The sky was clear and Steve knew that the storm would soon be over, the night would be bright.

He guided Shasta around a long mountain spur from which, in years gone by before he was born, Bronco Hale had taken the name for his Spur Rowel ranch. Now he could see the cottonwoods about the ranch house. But no lights beckoned in the windows. The place looked gloomy from the distance, wet, desolate, deserted.

Suddenly Steve Hale was jarred from his thoughts by the high-pitched whine of a rifle bullet passing close to his face. It was followed almost immediately by the sharp snap of a gun from somewhere on the slants of the spur.

Abruptly and with the instincts born of lonely and dangerous trails his hand flashed toward the rifle in the boot beneath his right saddle skirt. He hit the ground with a slewing twist, held Shasta beside him and peered up the slants for a sign of his would-be assassin. Another slug came, whining close.

Grimly he searched the rocks above him, sliding his rifle over Shasta's saddle. His eyes had missed the stab of gunflame and he judged that the sniper was firing either from a dense thicket of creosote or was too far away to be seen. He watched carefully, feeling his feet grow damp and wet in the soft ooze underfoot. He stood still for eight or ten minutes, and night gathered around him like a shield. His reward was aching muscles.

Finally satisfied that the killer had gone, he swung gingerly into his kak. No more bullets came and he felt that the

only thing that had saved him was the killer's poor marksmanship or the uncertain light. He gathered up his reins and gigged forward, his rifle across his knees, ready.

"I don't blame Dad for bein' uneasy if bushwhackin's the style uh killin' in Spur Rowel country," he told himself grimly. "Or mebbe the skunk mistook me for someone else. Time'll tell."

Alert, watchful for any further interference, he rode on toward the ranch. The moon was up now, casting a pale glow over the valley. Sight of the Spur Rowel heated his blood. This was home, the place of his birth—a place of fond memories, carved out of a raw land by old Bronco's sweat and toil.

ALMOST hidden in the shadow pools of the cottonwoods the Spur Rowel outbuildings loomed wet and glistening in the moon-fog. Wind sighed restlessly through the mushrooming trees, the last of the rain water gurgling from sloping, split-shaped roofs. Spur Rowel Creek, running full to its banks, hissed and snarled down its deep bosque toward the Pecos River.

A wild cowboy yell built on Steve's lips as he roared Shasta into the ranch yard and curbed in a long slide at the front porch of the dark house. But that cry died on Steve Hale's lips as his eyes swept off to the trees on his left. He left his saddle with a wild leap. He stood a moment, blinking at what the moon revealed. His hand sought the nubbin of his kak for support and for an instant he swayed, a blinding mist welling before his eyes. He saw two indistinct figures, swaying in the wind.

Two bodies weighted down an outflung branch of the cottonwood nearest the house. Rain water was dripping from down-stretched boot-toes. He ran forward to those swaying figures. With a sweep of his Bowie he cut down the limp, dead body of his father. His whole frame shook with the sobs of sorrow that racked him as he slashed the rope suspending Johnny, his younger brother.

Laid out side by side in the mud, their faces pallid in death, Bronco Hale and Johnny stared up through sightless eyes. An awful loneliness assailed him. He wept with rage and sorrow, and he was unashamed by the hot tears that burned down his cheeks.

He gently carried the two forms to the house porch, laid them out on the dry planks scarred by countless boots and spurs. There he stood over them, contemplating their silent faces. A terrible rage built up in him, crawled through his soul like something alive. He cursed, damned himself a hundred times for ever having left the Spur Rowel. Their deaths were gaping wounds in his heart that would never heal—even after the killers, whoever they were, had paid the price for this in blood.

A piece of soaked paper caught his eyes. It had been pinned to the pocket of old Bronco's plaid shirt. With palsied hands he carefully unpinned it, saw that something was written in pencil upon it. He held it up in the moonlight. The writing was all but run out by the wet. But it was readable. It read:

UNHEEDED WARNINGS MEAN —Death. Bronco Hale wouldn't take heed and death found him wanting—

(Signed) DEVIL'S DISCIPLES

Steve Hale's blood froze. Who in the name of Heaven were the Devil's Disciples? By what right had they to hang these men? The Pecos Valley had never been much of a stomping ground for organized renegades. To be sure, there had been the usual run of rustlers. But old Hamp Carter, sheriff, more of an institution in the Pecos than a mere lawdog, had cleaned them out as fast as they had come. Why hadn't he stopped this double murder?

There was the sniper's slugs that had almost put Steve in his grave. He choked up with new rage and the urge to kill—to keep on killing until this bunch of Devil's Disciples was wiped out by his own hand. Only that would satisfy his wild craving for vengeance. He flung up his right hand, tilted his face to the moon.

"Before God and my dead kin," he swore softly. "I swear to devote my life to venegeance—never to rest until the Devil's Disciples are in their graves or I, Steve Hale, die!"

For long minutes he stood over his dead kin, his head bowed, lips quivering. Then suddenly he heard a slight rustling sound at the side of the house.

His hands darted toward his guns. He knew the sounds were made by a man slipping along the side of the house.

Steve's eyes pinched to mere slits. He hunkered down beside the still forms on the porch, his fingers tight on the triggers of his twin .45's. His only thought was that the would-be assassin had trailed him to the house to finish his job. Let him come!

The skulker was coming closer now. Steve could hear his labored breathing. Could hear the sucking of his boots in the mud. Now the moon light was glinting on the barrel of a rifle thrust around the corner. Steve's fingers tightened on his trigger until his knuckles showed white, bloodless. The man's shoulder appeared like a dark hulk. Yet Steve waited to make sure of a killing.

There was no doubt in his mind that the skulker was one of the Devil's Disciples. Why else would the fellow be prowling around the Spur Rowel? It suddenly dawned upon Steve that if he killed the sneak he might never learn the identity of the Devil's Disciples. His nerves screamed out for the fellow to appear in the open. But the skulker was taking his time.

Then after a breathless moment the fellow shoved his head into view, peered around the corner, his rifle thrust forward. Steve Hale's cold voice ripped through the ghastly quiet like a knife. "Pitch up or shuck yore lead, hombre!" he clipped with a softness that was wicked. "I got yuh lined up for uh killin'. Come out into the open!"

He heard the skulker gasp. But the fellow did not dart back. He seemed frozen there for an instant. Then his voice sheered through the murk.

"Steve Hale — is that yuh?" he clucked, and Steve knew he was no more than a mere boy. His voice was just developing a masculine huskiness. "Hold yore lead, amigo. I'm a-comin' peaceful."

He stepped hesitantly around the house, his Sharps rifle cradled in the crook of his arm. Just a boy, Steve saw. He wore a sloppy-brimmed range hat. His thin legs were lost in his run-down range boots to which were strapped a pair of heavy spurs that glinted in the moon-fog. The youngster's Levi overalls would have fitted Steve himself. They were pinched and tucked about his slender waist, held there by a tight cartridge belt. But in the moon light Steve saw that he was a clean-faced lad with eyes that glittered like a cat's.

THE youngster stalked forward to the porch. His eyes bugged when he saw the two forms lying there. Steve was standing up now, his guns tilted down.

"They got 'em, huh?" the kid gasped and swallowed hard. "You come too late, Steve Hale," he added grimly.

"What do yuh know about this, kid?" Steve stepped over the silent forms, grabbed the youngster by the arm.

"I don't know nothin', Steve," the boy clucked. "Honest I don't."

"Then what did you mean by sayin' *they* got 'em?" Steve clipped.

The kid's tanned and delicately cut face screwed into a mask of hate. "It was knowed they'd get 'em," he hurried. "Everybody in Cowskin knowed ol' Bronco an' Johnny Hale was tabbed fer uh air jig. The Devil's Disciples accused 'em uh rustlin'—"

"Rustlin'?" Steve Hales voice could have been a knife that stabbed the shaking lad. "That's a dirty lie! No Hale was ever a rustler! No Hale was ever a renegade. The men that did this thing had other reasons! Tell me what they are?"

The boy shook his head, his eyes wide. "I dunno, Steve," he piped.

"Who are yuh?" Steve demanded. "What are yuh doin' on my ranch?"

"I'm Matty Holcomb, Parson Holcomb's boy," replied the lad tremulously. "I was out ridin' when the storm busted—"

"You mean out tuh pot-shoot me when I rode past the spur, is that it?"

" 'Taint so, Steve," he protested. "Iffen I'd uh shot at yuh, yuh'd uh been dead now. I wouldn't uh missed. Looky —I'll prove it. See that tincan a-layin' over there by the corral?"

Steve looked that way. He saw just a faint glitter of the moon on something bright. The kid had the eyes of a nocturnal animal. He could barely see the thing, glistening about the size of a half dollar. And it was a good twenty yards away.

"I see it," he said.

Matty wrenched free. His Sharps flew to his shoulder. The silence of the Spur Rowel was smashed by the explosion of

the rifle. The shining thing out by the corral disappeared instantly.

"Shucks, fella," the youngster turned, his eyes glittering. "Iffen I'd uh unlimbered on yuh, yuh'd uh gone down jes' like that. But I saw yuh ridin' thisaway, an' trailed yuh. I remember yuh, Steve, I was jes' a kid when yuh left the Spur Rowel. Don't remember me, do yuh, an' sis—?"

Steve pursed his lips, his eyes intent upon the upturned, expectant face of the lad. He nodded. "Reckon so, Matty boy," he said at length. "Yo're the kid that put the scorpion down Johnny's neck that time, eh?" And a new note of sadness came into his voice as mention of Johnny Hale brought his eyes back down to the still form on the porch.

"Aw, that was all in fun, Steve," Matty murmured. "I pulled its stinger out. Johnny'd booted me an' I got even. But I gotta go, Steve. The Parson an' Terry'll be a-worryin'."

"Terry?" Steve's brows went up. "How is she, kid? An' when did yore dad become uh preacher?"

"Sis is swell," beamed Matty. "Pretty'n uh picture now. An' paw started preachin' pronto after yuh left. Got uh church in Cowskin, built fer him by Burt Wyatt."

"Burt Wyatt?" Steve wondered who he could be. "Never heard uh the gent."

"Neither'd I till he come tuh Cowskin," Matty said solemnly. "Paw knowed him back in the old days somewhere. He's uh snake in the grass, Steve. Runs the Pecos River Bar. They call him Killer Wyatt, an' he's uh killer, all right. Got uh eye on sis an' I hate his in'ards."

"Does he ride with the Devil's Disciples?" Steve bit out viciously.

Matty Holcomb drew back. "Don't ast me that, Steve," he piped, frightened. "Even iffen I knowed, I couldn't tell yuh. Even the cottonwoods got ears nowadays an' when uh gent talks out uh turn in this country now, he's courtin' hisself uh soon grave. I'm goin' now—"

"Wait—!" Steve reached to stay the lad. But Matty Holcomb darted like a scared rabbit. Then Steve heard him hit leather somewhere beneath the trees and go galloping away.

IT dawned upon him abruptly that he had a chore to perform. In the hollow cottonwood behind the house might lay the solution to the mystery confronting him. The old Bisley Colt's that his father had mentioned in his letter might furnish the answer to this double tragedy.

The importance of the old Bisley built in his mind as he ran through the mud toward the rear yard. He felt sure that his father had some good reason for hiding the gun in the cottonwood. Possibly he had hidden a note in its barrel containing some information he had closely guarded and wanted him to have. In the murk he found the big tree.

Among those cottonwoods stood a white headboard. Beneath it lay his mother. He remembered the day old Bronco had buried her. And now—two new graves would be there, one on either side. He choked at the thought as his hands searched the hollow of the tree.

They contacted nothing but sodden wood-pulp and dirt. Startled, he straightened. Frustration gripped him. A surge of fury flooded him. His bleak eyes pinched narrow and he told himself that Matty Holcomb had beaten him to the tree, had ridden off with a lie on his lips and the precious Bisley perhaps tucked in his skinny waist.

Impulsively he charged back toward the house, slid to a halt beside Shasta, ready to mount. He felt he could overtake the youngster before he reached Cowskin. Then as he placed his foot in the stirrup his sharp ears picked up the approaching flutter of hoofs. He stiffened. His first thought was that the kid was returning.

CHAPTER II

A Little Man of Mystery

GRIMLY he listened to the sounds of the approaching horseman. It dawned upon him that someone else rather than Matty might be coming. Possibly grave danger rode that mysterious horse. Impulsively he led Shasta into the shadow pools beneath the dripping trees, stood beside him with drawn guns, and waited. The flutter of hoofs drew nearer. But

not from the lane that led up to the house from the highway stretching south to Cowskin. The rider was hitting leather up Spur Rowel Creek, keeping, it seemed, in the sodden willows of its gurgling bosque.

Steve's thumbs cared back his gun-hammers. His bleak eyes swept the distant shadows for a glimpse of the rider. He saw no one and then suddenly he was aware that the rider had curbed up somewhere near the creek. His blood hammering at his temples, he waited, sure that the man had quit his horse and was approaching the house on foot.

He heard a heavy thud as if the man had jumped the full-running creek bosque and landed on the opposite bank, his boots clomping in the mud. Steve crouched, his guns ready. Down by the creek he saw a movement of willow branches. The wind was still now. The movement could have been made only by a man or animal. And animals don't ride horses.

A cone-peaked sombrero, wet, sagging of brim, was thrust from between the willows. Beneath it appeared a dark face the color of old saddle leather. Steve Hale could have planted lead between those two onyx-like eyes that peered first this way and that to make sure the house was deserted. A sodden, multi-colored serape hung over the man's shoulders. The moon glistened on the pearl butts of his twin guns as he stepped suddenly into full view.

Stealthily the little Mexican slipped forward, crouched like some questing animal of the night, his hands splayed out over those gleaming gunheels. And as he drew nearer Steve was quick to recognize the visitor. Men called Chico Megares, a border bandit. But Steve Hale knew him for exactly what he was—a friend of the needy, a brown-skinned Robin Hood of the Rio Grande Mexicans, a kind, courteous friend to the *Americanos* who understood and respected him. He was known from the Panhandle to the Big Bend as *El Cuervo*—The Crow. He had the features of a crow. But Chico Megares was a man, a coiled rattlesnake of a man to his enemies.

The Crow was one of those strange, wandering souls who seem always to be searching for something they could never find. He had always been somewhat of a mystery to Steve. Old Bronco had once saved Chico's life. And Chico had never forgotten. When in the Cowskin country he had never failed to visit the Spur Rowel. And he had never gone away without the best old Bronco had to offer his most welcome guests.

Now Steve Hale wondered what brought The Crow so stealthily to the ranch. That the little Mexican did not wish to be seen, he could tell by his actions. Was Chico Megares mixed up in this ruthless murder? Could it be that The Crow and his *Dorados* formed the Devil's Disciples?

Chico Megares had been known to deal out quick justice. He and his men had a nasty habit of sweeping down unheralded, killing where they thought it was needed, and vanishing again. Hot rage built up swiftly in Steve Hale. But he beat it down. Chico had for years been a staunch friend of the Hales. He couldn't have murdered the man who had saved his life unless—unless that friendship had been killed somehow.

Steve waited. Chico slewed forward through the mud. Steve let him come, saw him reach the porch where he paused. He flung mute eyes at the two silent forms. A low oath came from his throat. "Madre de Dios!" Steve heard him murmur. "Mother of God, it has happened."

Then Steve, guns in his hands, stepped from Shasta's side, swung up to him from the rear. "Keep yore hands away from yore guns, Chico!" his voice seemed to stab the little Mexican in the back. Chico whirled, his sun-blackened hands shooting toward the glittering stars.

"Do not shoot, Senor," he pleaded, then gasped with relief. "Ah, amigo mio—it ees my fran' Steve Hale. Put up thee gons, Senor. Chico mean no harm."

BUT Steve ignored his request, kept his guns in his hands, muzzles on the little dark man, hammers eared back. "When a man sneaks upon uh house like a panther, Chico Megares," he bit out, "he is dangerous. Friends don't visit thataway."

Chico dropped his arms, spread out his small hands deprecatingly.

"Senor Steve," he purred, and there was sadness in his oily voice, "you do not understand. I come as a fran'—

weeth many enemies about. Many men ride thees countree who would do anytheeng to collect thee reward that dangles over my head. I deed not expec' to find you here, Senor. I came een answer to a letter from the good *padre* who lies dead on thee *portico*."

Steve's brows went up. "You mean Dad sent you a letter—?"

Chico nodded, "An' I came, like you, Senor—too late to help the man who saved my life wan time. I grieve weeth you, Senor Steve."

Steve's voice came passion-filled. "Yes, I came too late, Chico," he said. "I found them swingin' from the big cottonwood over there. How can I ever forgive myself for goin' away—?"

Chico's voice was soft with consolation. "Mebbeso, Senor," he said, "you too would have been hanged weeth them. They are many, my fran'. They would have keeled you. Now you leeve to avenge thees wrong of wheech I was fearful. That ees why I come all the way from my rancho een *Mejico*. A letter, she come from Senor Bronco. Heem weesh I should come weeth my Dorados an' help heem fight the Devil's Disciples. I come, too late. I am damned, Senor. Your *padre* was my fran' like you are my fran'. Now—heem dead an' my debt ees unpaid."

Steve surveyed the border bandit calculatingly. What did Chico Megares know? His face was an inscrutable mask, telling nothing. El Cuervo was a man who knew much, spoke little. What lay behind those shoe-button eyes of his? All the fury in his tortured soul gripped Steve Hale suddenly. Before Chico had time to move, he had him by the throat. Quick fear shot into the Mexican's eyes.

"Out with it, Chico Megares!" Hale snarled. "Tell it fast if yuh want tuh live. What do you know? How did yuh know this—this killing was to happen?"

The fear in Chico's eyes turned to hurt. His shoulders sagged. He made no protest against the hand that gripped his throat. His voice came in a gurgle. "Senor, I know nothing. Bronco, heem send me thee letter. He say come ver' queek weeth my Dorados. I come alone, for wan man ees better een danger than many. He say come—my life she een danger. Heem say look een the hollow tree for thee gon he hide there. I come for that gon, Senor, eef I am too late to help. Now I am too late. I want the gon!"

Steve's deep-biting fingers eased up. "Why do yuh want that gun, Chico?" he clipped. "What else did Dad say in his letter?"

"Eet ees all ver' strange to me, Senor," Chico responded. "Thee gon she ver' much a mystery. I do not know the why of eet. Heem say long tam heem no hear from you. Heem say he sent you a letter, but heem 'fraid you not get it, or get eet too late. That ees all I know, Senor. I theenk mebbeso thee gon she tell much."

Relaxing his grip, Steve contemplated him with a frustrated look.

"The gun is gone," he murmured. "Somebody beat me to it. Mebee it was that Holcomb kid. He was here—"

"Holcomb, eh?" Chico's black brows drew down menacingly. "The boy, heem innocent. I no like his *padre*. Heem like a willow that bends in the wind, Senor—this way an' that, never on the wan trail. Heem go from wan man to another lak' a tumbleweed on thee desert—she blow here, blow there."

"What do yuh mean by that, Chico?"

Chico shrugged his skinny shoulders. "I not know myself, Senor," he said cryptically. "Wan tam heem a rancher. Next tam heem preachin' the word of Dios. A man cannot be a good man an' fraternize weeth the bad."

STEVE was silent, his eyes burning into the little Mexican. Suddenly he seemed to realize that time was wasting. "Well, I'm gettin' nowhere here, Chico Megares," he snapped. "I've got tuh go to Cowskin an' corral that Holcomb kid. I want tuh know why he was here tonight."

"You be ver' careful, Senor," warned Chico earnestly. "Thees town of Cowskin ees not the peaceful, sleeping lettle town you knew before you went away. She wild now, Senor, weeth men who would keel for the price of a dreenk. They are like thee branches of a poisonous tree, Senor. An' to get at the bottim of thees murder you weel have to get to thee trunk an' chop eet down. The trunk ees the leader of the Devil's Disciples," the man explained.

"Who is he?" Steve's fury built up again.

Chico eyed him thoughtfully. "Eef I only knew, Senor," was all he said.

"Well," Steve ground out, "the trunk'll be axed in due time. Wait here. I'll carry Dad an' Johnny inside the house. Then we'll go to town."

Grimly he bent down and swung the stiff form of his parent into his arms, carried him into the darkened house and laid him down on the horse hair sofa in the parlor. As he did so he heard the slog of running feet in the mud outside. A low curse swept to his lips. Chico Megares had slipped away. He rushed outside.

"Chico!" he called out. "Chico! Wait!"

But only silence answered. The Crow was gone. He heard the fast thud of his horse's hoofs as he rode away into the night. A cold chill ran the length of his spine and he cursed himself for being so careless as to let this man get away. Now he was sure Chico Megares had covered up the killers.

With his head bowed, he went to Johnny, picked him up as he would a feather pillow and carried him into the house. Weighted down with his grief and his problems, Steve Hale sat in a chair in the parlor, head buried in his hands.

He did not know what to think. There was young Matty Holcomb—Chico Megares. Which one of them had fired at him from the spur? Which one of them had stolen the mysterious gun from the cottonwood? Who were the Devil's Disciples? Did Chico hint that Parson Matt Holcomb had something to do with the murders? What did The Crow mean by saying that no man can be a good man and fraternize with the bad? Was Parson Holcomb the trunk of that poisonous tree?

He went to the tool shed out by the corral. In the dark he found a spade. For an hour he dug into the soft earth. With each shovel full of dirt he cast out of the graves, his bitterness increased, his determination outgrew him. In his eyes piled all the sadness a human can have for someone loved when he packed the last shovel full of damp earth about the graves. At length he tossed his spade aside, carried rocks from a pile nearby. To spare his kin the ravages of coyotes, he heaped the rocks upon their graves. The moon gave him light and his task was soon finished. Then he stood over the graves, head bowed.

"Forgive me, Dad—Johnny," he murmured. "I came quick as I could. Now that I'm here I can only hope an' pray that the men who did this will come before my guns. No man can persuade me from my purpose. I'm goin' tuh kill an' keep on killin' till every one uh the Devil's Disciples is dead!"

Somewhere in the Organ knobs a coyote yammered as if mocking him. He turned away, brushing the tears from his eyes. Soon he was swinging into his saddle, riding down the lane toward Cowskin. He patted Shasta's steaming neck.

"We're carryin' hell tuh the Devil's Disciples, old son," he murmured softly. "I ain't forgettin' the feed I promised yuh. But yuh'll have to wait till we hit Cowskin. Then yuh can fill yore belly with oats in the corral whilst I have a look around. Mebbeso we'll learn somethin'."

Shasta, as if understanding, laid belly to the ground and went to it at his best pace. He was like a mud-duck in sloggy weather. Sure-footed, swift. And as Steve rode along through familiar country, his mind went back to his youth spent here. He and Johnny used to ride this road to the Cowskin school, a little red brick house that stood on the knoll in back of town. They had both ridden one horse and many had been the times they had battled over the right to sit the saddle.

He thought of the girl with the red hair who had sat across from him in school. Let's see now, Terry Holcomb should be about twenty, he calculated. He'd always liked Terry, suffered her wrath many times when his pranks made her angry. His lips split in a ghost of a smile when he remembered how he'd matted her red tresses with burrs.

He wondered how Terry would look now. Always she had been pretty. Hardly a freckle marred her soft, tan skin. In schooldays she had been pointed out by the other kids as Steve's girl. Then as she grew up they had parted, he to work on the Spur Rowel, she to take care of little Matty and keep house for her father. He hadn't seen her in about five years.

Thoughts of Terry brought him to Matty and what Matty had said about this Killer Wyatt who had built Parson

Holcomb a church and had his cap set for Terry. He'd never heard of Wyatt before. A stranger in Cowskin, he must be. A strange fellow, who could conduct the Pecos River Bar and build churches. What was he trying to do—dazzle Terry Holcomb? This Burt Wyatt would be a good person to put a gander on, he told himself grimly. He might be one of the Devil's Disciples!

CHAPTER III

Riders of the Dawn

DAWN was brightening the eastern skies when he climbed the last grade beyond which lay Cowskin. The first lances of the new sun were painting the scraps of the Organs with pastel shades as he reached the crest and looked down upon the bustling little cowtown. He paused to study the community under the light of the new day. Cowskin had grown some, he saw, had spread its boundaries like a kid growing out of his britches. He studied the town for a moment and then below he saw something that sent him plunging Shasta down the hill at break-neck speed. He jerked out his carbine, levered a cartridge into the chamber.

Through the tree aisles below raced a rider, plunging forward like mad. Riding hard behind him rode a posse of six horsemen, the early morning sun striking glints from their gun-barrels. They were bent over in their saddles determinedly. Steve saw one of them straighten as he plunged Shasta sliding down the muddy grade. The man's gun thundered. The fleeing horse emitted an agonized squeal, stumbled. The rider was thrown clear.

Now Steve Hale's rifle was at his shoulder, triggering a shot at the cavalcade who were bearing down upon the prone figure like a pack of hunting wolves. A man's sombrero sailed from his head like magic and Steve knew that his shot had been too high. Shasta had plunged just as he triggered, making him miss. But the sharp report of his rifle was enough to fetch the cavalcade to a quick halt. They looked up the grade, saw him coming. He triggered again, sent a second shot whistling among them. Then from another angle came the crack of a gun. The possemen were bewildered for an instant. Steve wondered who the second rifleman could be and thought of Chico Megares. He smiled grimly when the cavalcade wheeled suddenly, fled the scene wildly. It was then that Steve saw they were masked. His heart jumped into his throat.

The Devil's Disciples. He was sure of it! He emptied his carbine after them, saw geysers of dirt kick up at their heels. But Shasta was taking the grade in wild leaps. His bullets went wide. He could have taken after them, but his eyes swept the fallen rider who was sprawled face-down on the ground. Close by, the injured horse was kicking and squealing in agony.

Grimly Steve rode up to it, drew his six-shooter and mercifully ended its misery. A sharp cry behind him made him wheel. Then he saw the rider sitting up, saw that it was a girl dressed in mud-streaked Levis and plaid shirt, She drew off her range hat, ran a shaking hand over her brows. A mass of titian hair tumbled about her temples and neck. She seemed in a daze as he rode up, lit down beside her.

She swept him with fear-filled eyes and drew away. He saw she was range born from her cascading hair to her hand-tooled boots. Her ripe lips were puckered with pain. She dropped a hand to her shoulder, felt it gently. Quick rage built up in Steve. What in the name of God kind of men were the Devil's Disciples to trigger down a helpless slip of a girl?

He knelt down beside her, eyes amber-flecked with fury. "Hurt, ma'am?" he bit out. "I saw 'em chasin' yuh, scared 'em away with a couple uh shots. Anything I can do, ma'am?"

Warmth flashed into her eyes. "I've hurt my shoulder," she murmured huskily. "Feels like it's dislocated."

"Let me see," and he took hold of her arm, lifted it up. She flinched, gave a little cry.

"Mind if I feel for broken bones, ma'am?" he queried tersely. She nodded, and his fingers played gently over her biceps and shoulder. He flexed the arm again, feeling the bones as he did so. He straightened. "Reckon no bones are fractured," he said. "Prob-

ably pulled the muscles. Yo're lucky, ma'am. Might've broken yore neck."

"Oh," she relaxed. "I was afraid it was serious. It's kind of you to help me."

STEVE watched her closely as he took off his bandanna and fashioned a sling. He found himself admiring the curve of her red lips. They were the color of the bloodroot that grew in profusion about her, wet with rain and dew. Her finely chiseled face was tanned, her hands strong and capable. And there was something mighty familiar about her, he realized suddenly. It set him to wondering, thinking back to his school days when he had thrown a wad of burrs at a certain little girl whose hair was the color of this one's. A tiny smile played at the sides of his mouth and vanished.

"Why were they chasing you, ma'am?" he put to her softly. "Who were they?"

The look of pain fled from her eyes. It was replaced by one of real fear, horror. Color drained from her cheeks. She caught her breath and a brown hand darted to her throat as if to hide the throb of her quickening pulse there.

"Oh, don't ask me about it," she sobbed. "Let us be thankful they were frustrated. I don't know what they would have done to me."

"Well, they'll pay someday, ma'am," Steve's voice seemed far away. It was like a growl deep in his throat. "You needn't tell me why they were after you. Reckon I already savvy that. They've struck at me, too, took from me those for whom I'd have given my life anytime. I'm Steve Hale, ma'am."

New horror and fear widened the girl's blue eyes. For an instant she seemed speechless. She struggled to get up. He put his strong arms about her trembling shoulders lifted her, held her close to him. Her titian hair played about his lips as she buried her head against his chest and gave vent to her emotions. He let her cry, drinking in the intoxicating fragrance of those tumbling curls. When her sobbing ceased he helped her to a fallen log.

"Oh, what is to become of us all?" she murmured.

"Why not tell me all about it, ma'am?" He dropped down beside her grimly. "It's my right tuh know, I reckon, seein' as how it's my fight same as yores. Mebbeso what yuh know'll sorta help me with my fight against these men who call themselves the Devil's Disciples. You know, ma'am, there's somethin' mighty familiar about yuh. You ain't Terry Holcomb, are yuh.

Her head lifted. She smiled faintly. "I am, Stephen," she said quietly. "I'm Terry Holcomb. I—I've never forgotten you, nor those burrs you put in my hair."

A strange thrill shot through Steve Hale. She hadn't changed much, except to become more beautiful, more developed. She had been something of a tomboy during school days. Now she was all girl—all feminine and her loose Levis failed to hide the suppleness, strength of her shapely body.

"Yeah," he murmured. "It was fun. Now it's something serious. Instead of burrs being thrown at you, it's lead. Tell me about it."

He took her small hand, studied it, aware that her eyes were watching him closely. Steve Hale was still good to look at, she thought, would be handsome except for the dark pouches beneath his eyes, the terrible grimness of his taut lips. No, she had never forgotten him, never would forget him. But could she ever forgive him for his indifference toward her? Why hadn't he been more attentive before he'd gone away from the Pecos Valley? Why had he been so blind when all through school she had admired him, dreamed of the day when they might become closer—more than just school chums. Now he was grown to manhood. And she saw in Steve Hale a real man—all man. He was so grim now, so steely and hard.

"There is nothing I can tell you, Stephen," she said softly. "Nothing that would keep you out of danger. Now that you've had to shoot my horse—would you mind riding me home?"

"Of course not, Terry," he said. "Do you still live on the old Double X Bar?"

SHE shook her head, "No," she told him. "We've given up ranching. Father is preaching the gospel now in the new Cowskin church."

"That's what Matty, yore kid brother, was tellin' me last night—about yore dad bein' a parson," Steve said reflec-

tively. "Sounds funny—him preachin'. He never used tuh be a sky-pilot."

"He was always more or less religiously inclined," she volunteered. "When Mr. Wyatt offered to build him a church—"

His eyes puckered. "This Wyatt hombre, ma'am," he broke in. "What kind of a galoot is he? Funny uh gent can run uh saloon an' then build a church where the parson can preach agin him."

"Father is deeply indebted to Mr. Wyatt," she said. "He is very generous."

Steve nodded. "Reckon he can afford tuh be," he said grimly, "with uh pretty gal like yuh in the jackpot, Terry."

She flushed. "What was Matty up to when you saw him?" she queried, changing the subject abruptly.

"That's what I'd like tuh know, ma'am," he replied curtly. "I aim to find out what he was prowlin' around the Spur Rowel for."

She stood up, looked down at him closely. "Whatever it was," she said tersely, "it was honorable. What did he tell you?"

Steve rose, towered over her. "What do yuh think, ma'am?" he said cryptically.

Terry gave a quick start. Again fear sprang into her eyes. "He is so young," she hastened. "Pay no attention to anything he says. I've warned him to keep his lips sealed—for his own health. They'd kill him if they thought he knew anything."

"Who?" Steve demanded eagerly.

But Terry Holcomb walked away, her head hanging. Again she had evaded him and he was sure that she could tell him much about the mystery killers of the Pecos. Grimly he followed her to Shasta, helped her into the saddle and mounted behind her. He took the reins, thrilled at the feel of her warm body in his arms.

They rode toward Cowskin. Steve wondered what was occupying her mind, wished he could see her face. "You still haven't told me about the Devil's Disciples," he blurted suddenly, and felt her body grow taut.

"I cannot tell you anything, Stephen," she said. "I wish to God that I could, for you should know. I know no more than anyone else. Who they are, nobody seems to know, or will tell. It's terrible the way they've been riding roughshod over the land. And, Stephen, if you love life, take my warning and leave the Pecos forever. They killed your father and brother. They will kill you too."

Steve laughed coldly, mirthlessly. "I'll never leave the Pecos until they are dead or I'm in boothill," he avowed sternly.

"You cannot fight them," she pleaded. "You are one against many. You haven't a chance to win out, Stephen. Please go—for your own good."

"Why would they want to kill me?" he demanded. "I've done them no harm."

"No," she said. "Neither did your father or brother. That doesn't stop them when one possesses something they want—"

"You mean," and Steve's voice was like a clap of thunder, "that they want the Spur Rowel?"

"Oh, Stephen," she breathed. "I don't know. Don't question me. Can't you see my heart is torn enough for you—and the good people who have suffered the ravages of the Disciples?"

"I've got a right to know!" he stormed. "You've got to tell me. I want to know what I'm riding into here. Who are the Disciples?"

She flinched at the knife-like edge of his voice. "I can tell you nothing beyond that they began as a vigilante committee, then became drunk with their power, using that power to their own ends. Father gave them their name—the Devil's Disciples. They are that, Stephen—worse. But who they are, I cannot tell you. Nor can anyone else, even if they knew. They'd be afraid of their wrath."

Cowskin confronted them now. The sun was well up in the sky, its heat beating down, fetching steam rising from the storm-drenched earth. On the edge of the busy little cowtown, Terry flung a hand toward a small frame house nestling under a grove of sycamores.

"I live there," she said tersely. "I am grateful to you, Stephen, for bringing me home."

"You might tell me why you were out ridin' so early in the mornin'," he gently put to her, guiding Shasta beneath the trees.

SHE shook her head, evasively. "The storm trapped me in the woods," she murmured. "I had to stay all night in that old log cabin along the creek. Then—they saw me riding toward town this morning, chased me."

He eased her from the saddle to the ground, feeling sure that she had lied to him. "Reckon it don't matter much," he mumbled. "I'll find out all I want tuh know from other sources. Sorry yuh won't help me out, Terry."

"Help you?" her strong fingers gripped his knee. "I'd do anything for you, Stephen—if I only could. Please believe in me, take heed to my warning and go away."

A mirthless chuckle swelled in his throat. "I couldn't leave now, Terry," he said. "I've a task tuh do an' I want tuh know yuh better."

A startled look came into her eyes. "You don't know what you're doing," she breathed, "and I see my arguments will do no good. But, Stephen, nothing you can do will bring back your father and brother to you. You might kill and keep on killing until every one of the Disciples are dead. But your kin will not return. Oh, please, Stephen, do not risk your life futilely."

"How did you know they were dead?" he demanded, scowling.

She stiffened, frowned. A flush crept upon her cheeks. "I must tell you, Stephen," she said in a swift torrent. "I was at the Spur Rowel when it happened. I saw it all—Matty and me."

He half rose in his stirrups, glared viciously down at the girl. "You were there?" he cracked out incredulously. "What for?"

"Looking for a gun in a hollow tree behind the house," she said, and before he could recover from his astonishment, she was running like a deer for the house. He saw her burst inside, slam the door shut behind her.

Steve Hale's blood raced to his temples. So Terry Holcomb had been at the Spur Rowel during the grim tragedy? And she had been after that mysterious Bisley! Why? Why had she gone there for it? How had she known it had been hidden in the tree? Did she get it—or had Matty or—Chico Megares gotten hold of it? Why did she refuse to give him information when he needed it so sorely? She was protecting someone! He was sure of it now. Who? Killer Burt Wyatt?

CHAPTER IV

A Meeting in Cowskin

STEVE HALE gathered up Shasta's reins. He walked the palamino toward the main street of Cowskin. Here, he felt, idle talk might tell him something He would listen for all he could hear and perhaps learn from a careless tongue something that would help him start hacking at the trunk of that poisonous tree whose spreading branches were members of the diabolical Devil's Disciples. He rode on to corral, curbed in and turned Shasta over to the shuffling, whiskered wrangler who limped up at his approach.

"Give him the best yuh got in oats," Steve ordered, running his smoky eyes appraisingly over the oldster. "Let him roll an' be careful uh his hind hoofs. He's mean tuh strangers."

"Looks like he's come a long way," the wrangler cackled, peering into Steve's face closely. "Mebbeso from Californy, huh? Yo're Steve Hale, I bet uh plugged peso."

Steve's brows went up in surprise. "That's right," he said. "How'd yuh know? Yo're uh stranger here, never saw me before."

The oldster's clammy voice spilled from his dribbling lips. "Ain't much goes on that ol' Stumpy Joe don't know, younker. I'm Stumpy, an' leetle birds tell me things. I got uh wooden leg, but it don't stop me. No siree, it don't. Looky—" He pulled up his pants leg, held up his artificial limb, fixed onto his knee. For a foot he had a sharp spike in the end of the leg, worn bright, sharp as a lance-head. "I kin kill uh man with that, case yuh ever git ringy with me," he went on, and Steve sensed the man was crazy. "Yes, siree, I kin. So yo're Steve Hale?"

Steve nodded, his face set hard. "Funny how yuh knowed," he muttered. "I never told nobody I was comin'."

The wrangler laughed devilishly. "Stumpy Joe knows all. I knowed yore paw pussonally. Bad, him bein' polished

off thataway with yore kid brother."

Steve's brows drew down. "Yeah?" he clipped. "Mebbeso yuh can tell me who killed 'em."

Another nasty cackle spilled from the oldster's tobacco-stained mouth. "A gent's uh fool tuh talk," he chuckled. "But purty soon yuh'll be beyond talkin'. All Cowskin knows who's gunna die next. Them killers allus paste the gent's name on the board front uh Wyatt's joint. Mebbeso yore name is there now. Them fellers aim tuh kill yuh like they aim tuh own the hull uh the Pecos Valley."

"An' who's goin' tuh do all this killin' an' ownin'?" Steve demanded in a low, vicious voice. Then before the oldster could reply a look of stark fear sprang over his pinched face. He squawked loudly, took Shasta's reins and ran. A low laugh came from behind Steve. He whirled, found himself glaring at young Master Holcomb.

"I allus thought the ol' jigger was loony, Steve," the kid grinned. "I was gunna put this scorpeen down his neck tuh hear him cackle."

And Matty Holcomb, a mischievous look in his eyes, was holding between his grimed fingers a writhing scorpion. Steve relaxed. Suddenly he felt sorry for the old corralman. The oldster was demented, he was sure, not responsible for what he said. Yet he wondered how he'd known him.

"You young hellion," he clipped at Matty. "What yuh want tuh devil him for? Jest when he was gonna tell me what I want tuh know."

"Him?" Matty's face writhed scornfully after the old man. "He wouldn't tell yuh nothin', Steve. He's crazier'n uh bed-bug with the fleas. Everybody knows that. 'Sides, I got tuh git even with him fer slappin' me 'tother day. I wouldn't a hurt him, though. This land-crab's stinger is pulled out. Pinch him, mebbe, but wouldn't stick him."

"You ought tuh be whupped," Steve swore. "Why'd yuh run last night?"

" 'Tain't safe tuh be seen with yuh, fella," piped the youngster, dropping the wiggling scorpion to the ground where it backed off, fangless tail raised, "onless yuh want tuh be hunged. You better git yore hawss an' slope, ol' son. Cowskin ain't safe fer uh Hale."

Steve Hale stiffened. "Supposin' yuh tell me who's anxious tuh put me in boothill!" he bit out. "Speak fast, Matty, before I lam the taw out uh yuh for stealin' that gun off the Spur Rowel!"

Fear overcame Matty Holcomb. He turned to run. But Steve's right hand shot out, collared him, shook him. "Where is it?" he clipped. "Where's that old pistol yuh took out uh that hollow cottonwood?"

"I dunno what yo're talkin' about, Steve, honest," Matty whined. "I didn't take no gun no time. That's gospel."

Steve shook him again. "Don't lie!" he snarled. "What was yuh doin' there?"

"You git yore paws offen me, Steve Hale!" Matty flailed at him impotently with his fists. "If I had uh gun now I'd shore as shucks put uh slug between yore ugly eyes, yuh spike-tailed son uh Satan. Lemme alone. I was jes' out ridin' last night, keepin' tab on sis, an' lost her in the storm. I didn't take no gun, or anything else."

STEVE let him go. Matty glared up at him furiously. "I'm sorry, Matty," said Hale, "if I was wrong. Yuh, see, I'm all upset over that killin' uh dad an' Johnny. Course yuh didn't have nothin' tuh do with it. But somebody stole a gun off the ranch last night or yesterday. Mebbeso yuh can help me find out who—if yuh ain't mad."

Matty's brows clouded seriously. Taken as a friend, Steve thought he might be of value to him. He hid the smile that crowded his lips.

"Shucks," said the kid, "uh feller's liable tuh make a mistake, Steve. I ain't sore on yuh. Only thing, I don't like tuh be called uh sneak thief. Gosh, I'd do anything but steal uh man's gun. No hard feelin's." And he thrust forward his begrimed fist which Steve took in a firm clasp.

Steve felt friendship in the youngster's grip. Here was a man's boy, Matty Holcomb, full of tricks, but withal a youngster to tie in with. He was sure now that the youngster had spoken the truth. It left one thing in his mind now —Terry Holcomb had gotten that gun from the cottonwood.

"Reckon I know who got the gun, Matt," he said, looking away toward

the little house on the edge of town. "But I'll get it back—sometime. With yore help, huh?"

"Count on me, Steve," the youngster beamed at the confidence the tall cowboy placed him. "I'll do anything but go gunnin' for the Devil's Disciples. Don't ast me tuh do that, ol' son.

"No, but yuh can keep yore eyes peeled," said Steve, thrusting a peso into the boy's hand. Matty's eyes bugged. "All I want yuh tuh do is tuh look around Terry's room at home an' see if yuh kin find an old Bisley gun with the front sight filed off."

"Terry?" Matty handed back the coin. "Yuh cain't bribe me tuh go agin my sister, Steve Hale," he flared. "Iffen she had anything tuh do with that missin' gun, she had good reason, tuh. Nope. I ain't buckin' my sis even fer yuh, hombre. Take yore peso an' choke on it."

"No looky, kid," Steve hastened. "I didn't mean it thataway. That gun's liable tuh get her inta trouble with the Disciples, Matt. That's why, if she's got it, I want to git it away from her afore they find out. You want tuh help me do that, don't yuh?"

Matty Holcomb's lips puckered. "I savvy, Steve," he said eagerly. "Mebbeso the Disciples want that gun an'd kill even sis tuh git aholt uh it, eh?"

"That's right," said Steve, offering the coin again.

Matty nodded grimly, shoved the coin into his pocket. "I allus thought sis was a leetle too nosey inta other folks' affairs," he said. "That's why I follered her last night. But she gave me the slip, I reckon. Now—I'll keep uh gimlet eye on her close."

He spun on his heels and went away, tugging up his pants as he went. Steve looked after him a long while, a mirthless smile splitting his tight lips. Out of the tails of his eyes he saw Stumpy Joe puttering around Shasta on the far side of the corral. A vague uneasiness assailed him. Were the Devil's Disciples actually bent upon killing him as the oldster had warned? He aimed to find out. He could eat at Wyatt's joint and take a casual look at the board to see if his name was upon it.

Turning away he wondered how the Devil's Disciples could know he was in the country unless—Terry Holcomb or Chico Megares—or even Matty, had informed them. Or had the sniper recognized him and fled to spread the news in Cowskin of his coming?

As he walked up the street toward the Pecos River Bar, he saw that Cowskin was already bustling with activity. Supply wagons from various familiar spreads were on the street, either coming in or leaving town. He recognized the brands of their horses. There was Jake Fannin's Seven Bar Seven teams drawing a big wagon out of town. Ponies bearing other brands known to him stood at various tie-racks where punchers left them to take a nip or two. Yonder, in front of Cash Trotter's Pecos Valley Cattlemen's Bank, Curt Sparr's pony stood, its Lazy S brand clear on its left flank.

Next to the General Store stood Sheriff Hamp Carter's horse, racked in front of the law office. He wondered why old Hamp hadn't shown up at the Spur Rowel to investigate the double killing. Everybody in Cowskin seemed to know about it. Yet there was Hamp's nag, head drooped, tail switching lazily.

He went on, noting that some new structures had gone up since his departure from the Pecos. One was a bright red brick building standing where once had been a stable. It was a one-story affair with a big glass window in front. Upon the window, in big letters, was a sign. It read:

Boudinot Blanchard,
Cattle Dealer, Loans, Investments.
Highest Prices—Lowest Interest.

ANOTHER stranger, Steve realized. He'd never heard of Blanchard before and decided he didn't like the man's name. He turned into Wyatt's Pecos River Bar. As he entered his glance fell on a bulletin board nailed up beside the swing doors. But there was nothing on it.

The foul air of the preceding night still clung to the interior of the saloon. The odor of spilled whiskey and sour beer, mixed with the rank smell of stagnant tobacco smoke, made his nostrils quiver. His eyes swept the long, narrow room. Over in a corner a poker game was in progress and from the looks of the players he knew it had extended on through the night. A lone bartender

was leaning lazily against the black mahogany.

"Somethin' tuh eat first, Bottles," Steve murmured, drawing up. "Sandwiches'll turn the trick."

The man, a thick-shouldered gent with a barrel chest and a bullet head, nodded sullenly, slammed open a slide door beneath the bar and placed a plate of stale sandwiches before Steve.

"With java," said Steve quietly, taking up a sandwich. It was hard, but he made no complaint.

"Ain't got no java, fella," the barkeep clipped back. "Beer do?"

Steve nodded. "Reckon so," he said, "if it's cold."

"Particular, aint uh?" Bottles grumbled. "Think we run uh ice plant here?"

Steve glared at him and said nothing. The beer was placed before him. He ate quickly, washing down the dry bread and jerked beef with generous swigs from his tall glass. Bottles went back to his corner, rested one elbow on the bar and watched him covertly.

It required only a few minutes for Steve to satisfy his appetite. He tossed a peso on the bar and turned to Bottles. "I crave tuh shake the hand uh the gent that puts out that kinda grub, fella," he said grimly. "Where's Burt Wyatt tuh be found?"

"Cain't see him," said Bottles sullenly. "He's holdin 'uh meetin uh the town's business men upstairs. Can't be disturbed."

"Whichaway is this meetin'?" Steve grunted.

Bottles nodded to a gallery that ran the length of the room. "Third door from the end,' he said, "but I'm tellin' yuh the boss is busy."

"I heard," said Steve, and deliberately walked to the steps leading upward to the gallery. Out of the tails of his eyes he saw the bartender stiffen. With the agility of an athlete the fellow took a quick hand-spring over the bar and as Steve reached the stairs his heavy hand fell on his shoulder, whirling him around.

"I said yuh warn't disturbin' the boss," the menial spat, "an' I meant it. Git out afore I throw yuh out."

"Bouncer, eh?" Steve swept the big man with a baleful glare. "Full uh fight. Ever been measured for boothill?"

Bottles stiffened. Apparently he was not accustomed to such insolence, for his right fist flicked out like the head of a striking snake. Steve had expected it. He ducked neatly.

Then Steve Hale's right whipped out and up. It nailed the bar menial flush on the jaw. Bottles' head snapped back. He sat down suddenly with a thump that rattled his teeth, jarred the bottled goods on the shelves behind the bar. For an instant he sat there stupidly. Then he bellowed loudly, leaped up.

Arms flailing, head lowered, Bottles charged down on him. The poker players quit to watch. A savage snarl burst from Steve's throat as he nimbly stepped aside. Again he drove out his right. It smacked into Bottles' cheek. Bottles reeled away, recovered his balance, and turned back, his hand feeling his split face. Blood gushed from a long cut Steve's knuckles had opened on his cheek bone.

The menial charged again, cursing. Steve jabbed, stepped out of his reach, jabbed again and slipped away. This kind of fighting bewildered Bottles who was no match for him. Big and heavy as he was, he was easy for Steve Hale, muscle-thewed, clear-brained. The gamblers howled words of encouragement to the menial. But Bottles paid no heed. He bored in and was straightened by Steve's murderous right. Then Steve's left whipped out, sank wrist-deep in the other's soft belly. Bottles folded up. Exultantly Steve nailed him on the chin as he went down. Bottles' face went blank, his eyes rolled. He landed on his face, banged his chin against the floor.

STEVE stepped back, wiped a bit of blood from his lips. Only then was he aware of the men who stood watching from the gallery. He heard their voices, looked up, recognized old Hamp Carter and Parson Holcomb. The other five he did not know. Then he heard Sheriff Carter's voice.

"It's young Steve Hale, by gosh!" the lawdog mouthed through his handlebar mustache. "C'mon up, Steve! We got uh meetin' goin' on that yuh ought tuh attend."

He stepped from the group, came forward to meet Steve as he reached the top of the stairs. He flung a heavy arm about his broad shoulders. "Good tuh

see yuh lad," he murmured. "Heard yuh was around. Sorry yuh had tuh come home tuh trouble."

"How'd you know I was here?" Steve demanded.

"Jest heard it nosed about, reckon," said Carter. "Everybody in Cowskin seems tuh know yo're back home. Come meet the leaders uh Cowskin, meetin' here tuh find ways an' means uh endin' the reign uh the Devil's Disciples."

They halted in front of the others on the balcony. They contemplated him coolly. "Gents," Carter lifted his hand. "Meet Steve Hale."

Grunts came from the others. Only one hand was extended in greeting. Parson Holcomb's. Steve took it, felt friendship in his grasp. "The prodigal son returns," he intoned softly: "to find what . . ."

"Death," growled Steve. "Murder!" and his voice rose passionately. "I come home to find my kin hangin' from uh tree—dead!"

"Too bad, Steve," said Carter. "I'd uh stopped it iffen I could."

"Let's git on with the meetin'," said one of the others. "Time's wastin' cryin'. C'mon, Hale, inside my office."

And Steve looked squarely at the tallest of the group. Here was Burt Wyatt, owner of the Pecos River Bar. He stood a head taller than the others, about even with Steve. His garb was the black broadcloth of the frontier gambler—box coat, flowing tie. He was about middle-aged, handsome. His leonine head sat deep on massive shoulders, tawny hair streaked at the temples with gray. In his immaculate garb, Steve immediately branded him as a range dude. He was clean shaven and his black, small eyes bored into him with biting intensity. There was the killer light in those eyes.

Wyatt led the way into his private sanctum. The others followed, with Steve and indolent Hamp Carter trailing. Chairs surrounded a long table. The room was gray with tobacco smoke. "Sit down, Hale," Wyatt invited. "Yo're jest in time."

Carter pulled up a chair for Steve, and the meeting came to order again. "Might as well know us all tuh start with, Steve," said Wyatt. "Like as not most us are strangers to yuh seein' yuh been away since afore we came here to start business. There's Cash Trotter, banker," and his hand swept toward the elderly man whose eyes seemed to gleam with a miserly look.

Steve had never met him, but knew of Cash. A hard man to deal with, Trotter, particularly in matters of borrowed money and mortgages. He was a stickler for prompt payment when due, and many ranches had changed to his hands because the luckless owners had borrowed and had failed to meet payment on time. His round little eyes swept over Steve, narrowed. And Steve decided that he liked him no more than Wyatt. Cash was a rotund little man, not quite as old as he looked. But he had a reputation for being swift on the draw and had killed several renegades who had attempted to rob his bank.

Cash Trotter simply nodded by way of acknowledgment, and Wyatt swept on to Boudinot Blanchard, the cattle buyer and land shark. Bood, as the saloon proprietor called him, was a heavy, brutal-faced man with thick, beetling brows. The cold impact of his eyes told much to Steve. Here was a man who could kill and enjoy it. His lips were beefy, red, parted in a perpetual snarl. A tough hombre, Bood Blanchard. The heel of a hideout gun protruded from under his left armpit, and Steve saw that it was notched. Blanchard said: "Howdy," and gave a little wave of his museled hand, a hand, Steve saw, that might easily choke a man to death.

Next came Basalt Baker. A mining man, Wyatt said. Steve realized that when he looked at him. A stubble of beard covered Basalt's jowls. His eyes were blue as the sky, depthless, hard to read. He seemed never to blink, but stared straight at you as if you didn't exist. Baker was handling mining stock in Cowskin and controlled the Ace-High up in the Organs. He wore the garb of a miner, high boots, check shirt. But his long hands seemed too soft for a man of labor, and Steve put him down as a man who lived on the sweat of others. He wore one gun, tied-hard and low down. Only a dyed-in-the-wool gunman tied his holster, Steve knew.

"Reckon yuh already know Hamp an' the sky-skipper," went on Wyatt.

THE Parson nodded, smiled broadly. It was a weird smile, puzzled Steve. Holcomb's big hands were folded across

his slab-muscled belly. A big man, powerful, with white temples and iron-gray hair. This man had always been a mystery in the Pecos. Nobody knew where he came from and he never talked of his past.

Hamp Carter was getting old in office. He slumped dejectedly in his chair like a man who had given his all to the world and failed. He was the only man in the bunch Steve felt he could trust.

From one to the other Steve's smoky eyes ranged. These men, he knew, were Cowskin's foremost citizens. He felt an undercurrent of uneasiness—or was it fear?—among them.

"We're holdin' this meetin', Hale," Wyatt went on, "tuh figger out some way uh knockin' the horns off'n the Disciples who like as not yuh already know, did for yore dad an' brother. We are meetin' tuh talk about the violence these same devil-breed have been visitin' upon Cowskin an' it's surroundin' country. We need help, plenty help. We need uh gun-slammer like yuh on our side, a feller who will fight tuh the last white chip. Mebbeso yuh'd like tuh join us, an' when the Disciples find out that The Gunhawk, as they used tuh call yuh around Pecos, is ridin' herd with us, they'll git skeered an' quit, hands-down. What yuh say, fella?"

Steve felt every eye burn upon him. He glanced around the room. There was a smirk on Cash Trotter's lips, a frown clouding Bood Blanchard's biting eyes. Holcomb sat tense. Carter was listless. Baker's hand played over his gun-butt. Wyatt looked bored and unconcerned as he inspected his immaculate fingernails. And the one man whom Wyatt had not bothered to introduce—he sat somewhat out of the meeting, behind Burt, his chair tilted back against the wall, a sneer on his thin lips. He was of the common run of gun-slammers and Steve judged him to be a body guard of Wyatt's. The fellew was brutal, savage and slovenly.

Steve rose from his chair, and the undercurrent of fear among the others seemed to become more pronounced as their eyes fell upon his tied-down guns.

"All I got tuh say, gents," he said softly, "is that I'm in the Pecos Valley tuh stay an' tuh fight," his voice dropped bitterly. "When the men who murdered my kin cross my trail, I'm goin' tuh kill 'em. I'll be knowin' who they are soon. Yuh gents are either with me in huntin' down the killers, or yuh ain't. Whether yuh are or not, makes no difference. I'll gun 'em down as I find 'em!"

CHAPTER V

A Name on the Board

TENSION gripped the room as he sat down, fumbled blindly for his Bull Durham and papers. His hands trembled with passion as he rolled his shuck. Only the Parson spoke, and then intoningly. "Them that sow the seed uh hate," he said, "will reap harvest in vengeance. The Good Book sayeth—"

"Hang what the Good Book says, skipper," clipped in Bood Blanchard. "What do yuh know about them Disciples, Hale? Anything?"

Steve lighted his smoke before replying. Then his passion-filled eyes clashed with those of the cattle-buyer. "Not a thing, Blanchard," he murmured, "but I expect to soon. I think dad left me some word uh identity. When I find it—"

"You mean that gun?" Holcomb drew forward intently.

Steve's eyes crashed on the sky-pilot. Holcomb flinched. "What do yuh know about that gun?" Steve shot at him.

Holcomb cringed. His eyes rolled solemnly, piously. "All I can say is that yore father wrote Terry uh note askin' her tuh get uh gun he was hidin' in a hollow tree," he gushed. "It was to be got if anything happened tuh him or yore brother John, an' delivered tuh yuh when yuh returned. She went out last night to get it—"

"And did she?" Steve bit out.

"I don't know, son," hastened Holcomb. "I haven't seen her since she left. I do not know where she is and I'm anxious about her."

"Well," Steve relaxed. "She's home now. I brought her in." He turned to Wyatt. "What do yuh know about this bunch uh hell's scum callin' themselves the Devil's Disciples, Wyatt?"

The saloonman looked up, and Steve could have sworn there was contempt in his eyes.

Wyatt shrugged his massive shoulders. "No more'n the rest, I reckon," he said, "or you, Hale. A man rode in last night an' told us about the killin'. You must've got there soon after. But that warn't the only killin' the Disciples did last night. They tarred an' feathered Hunkey Dory Holmes on his Sashweight spread an run him out uh the country, leavin' his foreman, Bud Davis, swingin' from uh barn rafter. We heard about that this mornin'. Them fellers rode hell out uh the country last night. We was out lookin' for 'em ontil sunup. But we didn't cut no trail."

Steve's eyes pinched. "By any chance yuh didn't happen tuh be masked an chasin' down uh girl, did yuh?" he murmured.

Wyatt stiffened, glared back. "What yuh mean by that?" he demanded.

"Meanin' that the lowdown skunks ain't above killin' uh woman," he clipped. "Jes' a bunch uh yella dogs an I'd jes' love tuh take 'em one by one or all together an' burn 'em down. I shot at 'em this mornin'. They coyoted like a bunch uh scared rabbits."

"*You* shot at 'em, eh?" Blanchard's eyes burned on him. "If yore shootin' is so good as it's cracked up, whyn't yuh drop a couple uh them?"

Steve did not miss the contempt and scorn in the cattle dealer's tone. And there was something of a subtle threat in his first words.

"At least one uh them knowed he was shot at," Steve scowled. "I'd uh got a couple uh them if it hadn't been for the girl. I lit down to see how bad she was hurt—"

"What girl?" Parson Holcomb demanded, alarmed.

"Yore daughter, parson," gave back Steve, reproachfully. "You can't care much what happens tuh her, lettin' her run wild thataway."

"An' yuh say the Disciples was chasin' her?" Holcomb's eyes swept from Steve to Wyatt, held for an instant, pinched almost shut.

Steve nodded grimly. "But we're gettin' nowhere talkin' uh the past. Let's git down tuh business an' see what we can do."

"My sentiments exactly," snapped Carter, straightening in his chair. "Damn me, I've rid myself gaunt tryin' tuh cross them jaspers. The whole town is yelpin' at me tuh ketch 'em. But they won't help none. They'd ruther hide behind closed doors an' let me do all the work. This meetin' is tuh form a committee uh six tuh help me, Steve. Now that yo're in with us, it makes seven. We ought tuh git somewhere. But we got tuh work fast an' save time. We can't drag these gents away from their business tuh go traipsin' all over hell. Bood's got his cattle an' investments tuh look after, an' Wyatt is needed here. The Disciples has got the country so scared that everybody's leavin' their spreads in fear uh their lives. All uh which makes it plumb difficult for Cash Trotter there tuh collect on his outstandin' loans. He's needed at the bank. So we got tuh plan one big campaign an' either clip the horns offen them killers, or quit belly up. Pussonally, I'm whupped, younker, but I ain't through yit, by hell!"

There was passion, determination in his voice as he ended. The patches under his eyes seemed to have grown larger, darken. But the set of his gaunt jaw was encouraging to Steve. He spread his hands out on the table. "Well, I'm yore huckleberry, Hamp," he murmured. "I'll be yore right bower if yuh want. I'll do anything tuh bring them killers tuh the bar uh justice—or kill 'em myself. I've promised dad an' Johnny I'd never rest until that gang is plumb wiped out. This is my home, gents, just like it's yor'n. We won't be run out. I hear tell there's six uh them Disciples. That's too many. They're shore tuh make uh mistake an' if I don't miss my hunch, they already made it at the Spur Rowel. The secret may be in that ol' gun dad left for me. I'll get it somehow."

"We'll help all we can," put in Wyatt. "Got any suggestions tuh make as tuh how we're gonna corral them jaspers?"

STEVE thought a minute, aware that every eye was boring into him. His mind raced. Supposing some of these men were members of the unholy bunch? Suspicion flared in him. He had no particular plan in mind. But to be sure, it might work against him to have any treacherous member of this band of vigilantes, newly-formed, to carry his words to the Disciples.

"No, I reckon not," he said at length, shrewdly. "I'll work out something pronto. Meantime, I intend to do uh bit uh scoutin' around. I've got at least one good lead that may help some in dishin' death tuh the Disciples. We'll see how she pans out. I'll let yuh know, Wyatt, in due time an' yuh can call another meetin'."

Wyatt nodded, got up. The others rose with him. Parson Holcomb stepped over to lay a hand on Steve's shoulder. "Come down tuh the revival meetin's at the church, son," he invited, "an' listen tuh my sermons agin the Disciples."

"If I get a chance, parson," said Steve.

He matched Carter's steps down to the barroom. The bartender glared at Steve, but made no attempt to carry the fight further. Steve watched him covertly as he went with the sheriff outside, saw Wyatt pause to talk with him.

As he stepped outside with Carter, he decided that the less he talked of his plans against the clique, the longer he would live. The sheriff nudged him. "They's things yuh didn't tell up there, younker," he said with a twinkle of his eyes. "You kept somethin' back. I could tell, son."

Steve glanced around to make sure nobody was within earshot. The others were standing in a knot at the end of the porch, talking quietly.

"Chico Megares is ridin' the Pecos, sheriff," he whispered quietly to Carter. "Saw him last night at the Spur Rowel."

Carter gave a start. "The Crow!" he grunted. "It's him, Steve, an' his Dorados as shore as yuh've come home tuh trouble!"

Steve shook his head. "Mebbeso, but I can't believe it," he breathed. "He was alone—left his Dorados down in Mex."

The lawman swore softly. "He's uh slick 'un, kid," he said. "I wouldn't trust that greaser no farther'n I could toss uh hawss. I'm copperin' uh bet him an' his *ladrones* are the Disciples!"

"I think yo're wrong, Hamp," said Steve grimly, and then he recounted the attempt on his life to the lawman, how the rifleman on the spur had almost tallied. Carter listened intently.

"My last chip it was the Mex potshootin' at yuh, Steve," he swore.

"No," Steve insisted, "it couldn't have been Chico. I know that hombre's shootin' too well. He wouldn't have missed."

Carter's brows drew down. "Reckon yo're right," he admitted reluctantly. "That feller never triggered at uh man yet that lived tuh tell the tale. But he coulda done fer yore kin, younker."

"Hardly likely," countered Steve. "He wouldn't harm the man who once saved his life, would he?"

"Yuh never know what uh border bandido like him'll do next," Carter went on doggedly. "They're snake breed, son. I'm gunna look for his sign an' hang on. I'll skin the hide offa him iffen I git hands on his skinny neck. Besides, I think he lied when he told yuh he'd left his Dorados down in Mex. I've never knowed him tuh ride without 'em hangin' around close like a pack uh wolves. Bounty on his head, kid. I'm gunna collect one uh these days."

"Well, I'm belly up now, Hamp," said Steve, "but I'll have the Devil's Disciples in yore keepin' or in boothill in a week."

"Better be boothill," growled Carter, "because with no evidence agin' 'em, I couldn't convict."

"What about that wrangler at the corral?" Steve said darkly. "New here, yet he knows me."

"He's nuts," grunted the sheriff. "Came in about two-three years ago, soon after Wyatt an' Bood Blanchard."

"Why'd they tar an' feather Hunkey Dory an' string up Bud Davis?" Steve queried.

Carter looked at him darkly. "It's the Disciples' way uh runnin' uh gent out a town an' scarin' everybody else," he explained. "Them skunks is hankerin' tuh run the whole Pecos, but the only gents I kin figger out profitin' on their leavin's is Bood Blanchard an' Cash Trotter. They hold paper on durn near every ranch in the country."

"Not on the Spur Rowel, they don't," clipped Steve. "It's clear as uh bell, or dad would've told me."

"I wouldn't be too shore uh that," said Carter, "the way that bunch works."

He turned away toward his office. Steve twisted around at the sound of feet approaching him and he saw Cash Trotter bearing down on him.

"Don't like tuh talk business to yuh when yore mind is full uh grief, Hale," Trotter said, "but yore dad borrowed eight thousand against the Spur Rowel an' died without payin' up. The note is due in jest two days, bank-closin' time."

SWIFT anger built up in Steve Hale. "Why—why—" he stammered, groping for words. "You must be mistaken. Dad never told me about it."

"I ain't mistaken," countered Cash, "an' I can't help it if he didn't tell yuh. All I want is my dinero when it's due."

"You'll have tuh give me an extension uh time," said Steve. "I can't raise eight thousand that quick."

Trotter shook his head. "Sorry," he rasped. "I'm in the hole now not bein' able tuh collect on my paper since them Disciples have been raisin' pyrootin' hell. Much as I'd like tuh be lenient with yuh, I cain't. Yuh'll have tuh pay up or—deed me the Spur Rowel."

"I will like hell!" Steve flared. "It's all I got in the world an' it's worth five times the amount uh that loan!"

"Well," Trotter shrugged indifferently, "if yuh want I should foreclose—"

"Foreclose," Steve's voice dropped to a cold whisper, "an' yuh'll have a hell of uh time puttin' me off, Trotter. Two days, bank closin' time, huh? All right! I'll pay off then—if there's any Disciples left tuh pay to!"

Steve was sure Cash Trotter swallowed his Adam's apple with that threat. His beady eyes swept to the saloon porch where the others were still talking. Steve sent a glance in that direction, stiffened. A square of white was tacked on the board side the swing doors. None had been there a moment before. He looked back at the banker. Cash's face was blanched white. He spun on his heels and hurried away. Like a magnet that bulletin board drew Steve back to the porch. He paused, read its contents.

All color fled from his face as the full significance of that terse warning printed in bold letters and tacked on the Bulletin board swept through him. A cold chill ran up his spine at the very callousness of the men who had tacked it there. It read:

THE NEXT TO DIE
Steve Hale, take heed.
You are next.
(Signed) Devil's Disciples.

A surge of hot blood rushing like a torrent to his temples flushed his cheeks, leaving little white patches around his cheek-bones. With quick viciousness he tore the warning from the board, balled it in his fist and looked around. During the moment he had studied that warning, the otherrs had left the porch unnoticed. Wyatt and Bood Blanchard were striding down the street toward the cattle-dealer's office. Sheriff Carter was gone. Basalt Baker was just entering the General Store. Cash Trotter had long since fled into his bank and the man Wyatt hadn't introduced was flanking his boss and Blanchard. Parson Holcomb was nowhere in sight.

Any one of the men on the porch might have posted that grim warning of impending death.

"So I'm next, eh?" he muttered acidly. "Steve Hale, next man tuh die! We'll see about that, damn 'em!"

The Devil's Disciples had thrown down their challenge. Now they would come for him and in coming they would have to show themselves.

"They've tipped their hand now," he told himself grimly as he left the porch and headed down the street toward the corral, his pinched eyes alert, hands brushing his .45's. "I'll let 'em come for me at the Spur Rowel, an' when they come they'll find me waitin'!"

He reached the corral, strongly suspicioning Cash Trotter of some treachery in the matter of that loan. It seemed unreasonable that old Bronco had borrowed that much money. He hadn't needed it, he felt sure. There was something crooked in Trotter.

Stumpy Joe's hideous voice grated through his thoughts. "So yo're next, hey, button?" the corralman cackled, sneering. "Got yuh all spraddled out fer uh killin' now, ain't they?"

Steve pulled up short, glared at the man. How did Stumpy Joe know so quickly that the unholy legion had him marked for death?

"Who told yuh, Stumpy?" Steve demanded.

Crazy laughter swelled from the hostler's lips. "The grasshoppers, mebbe," he gushed, "ir it might uh been the woodticks I jes' curried offen yore nag. Nothin' goes on I don't know, button."

Steve Hale believed that and he won-

dered if the oldster's craziness was just a sham to hide the real personality behind it. This supposedly insane idiot with the wooden leg and the murderous spike for a foot could easily be the diabolical leader of the Devil's Disciples.

"I'm ridin'," he told him tersely. "Fetch my hoss. An' yuh can tell them grasshoppers an' the woodticks that I'll be waitin' on the Spur Rowel for them that wants my blood!"

THE oldster's lips split in a wide grin. "They don't need no one tuh tell 'em he chuckled insanely. "They already know where tuh find yuh an' they'll git yuh. The Disciples never fail, button."

And he limped away, laughing wildly to himself as if something amused him greatly. In a moment he was back leading Shasta. Steve saw that the palamino had been freshly curried. His hide glistened. Steve flipped a coin at the oldster who caught it like a striking rattler.

"Who yuh goin' tuh tell, old timer?" he murmured cunningly.

Stumpy laughed again and drew down his head. He flicked an imaginary fly from his nose. "The grasshoppers," he cackled. "I savvy their talk an' they tell me things. I'll tell 'em somethin', too, button. Any one uh them might be uh Disciple in sheep's clothing. Hah! Hah! Hah! That's plumb funny."

Steve relaxed, shook his head in pity. The oldster had a warped brain. He was just a simple child dreaming fantastic things.

He swung into his saddle, waved at the hostler and gigged Shasta toward the outskirts of Cowskin. As he passed Terry's home on his way to the Spur Rowel he saw the parson sitting in a rocker on the front porch. Holcomb waved at him and he returned the greeting. He looked for Terry. But she was nowhere about. Nor was Matty.

CHAPTER VI

Death's Rendezvous

THE gush of fresh air that greeted Steve Hale when he rode out of town was refreshing. Galoping along the road toward the Spur Rowel, wind whistling past his ears, a semblance of his old self returned to him.

The valley rolled out toward the hills, deep with grass. He breathed deeply of the fragrant air. The world seemed fresh, new, after the storm. The smell of rain was still lingering. But the road under Shasta's flying hoofs was dry, the surface hard. There was no dust. Steve relaxed in his saddle. But heavy was his heart with grief when he finally curbed Shasta at the Spur Rowel ranch house.

Grimly he ground reined the palamino and found his way once more under the cottonwoods. Perhaps during the excitement and dark of the night preceding, he had overlooked the hidden gun. Now he would search anew. He almost prayed he would find that old Bisley which he and Johnny used to play Indian with. But it was a disappointed Steve Hale who found nothing in that hollow tree. The gun was gone.

He returned to the house, wandered about aimlessly, studying the ground. But the only tracks he saw were his own and those of Matty Holcomb, and the small boot-prints of Chico Megares. The ranch was deathly still. He drifted to the corrals. They were empty. Nothing of interest was in the big barn beyond. Finally he retraced his steps to the house, entered.

A table was upturned in the kitchen. He judged that Bronco or Johnny had been preparing supper when death swooped down. In the frying pan lay a slab of burned steak. The coffee pot was full, cold. The table had been set for two before it had been tipped over, probably by milling, fighting bodies. Broken dishes lay scattered about. Either old Bronco or Johnny had drawn a gun, too late to be of any use. The six-shooter was lying in a corner where the killers had thrown or kicked it.

He retrieved the gun, smelled its muzzle and looked at the cylinder. It had not been fired.

He laid the gun aside and straightened up the kitchen. His mind reviewed the events of the day as he worked. When he thought of Cash Trotter and his demand for payment of that mysterious loan to old Bronco, his eyes pinched almost shut. And Cash had threatened to foreclose, giving him but two days to raise the money.

Steve Hale knew he could not raise

that amount so quickly unless he borrowed heavily against the Spur Rowel. It was easily worth three times the amount of Trotter's lien—if there was such a lien, legitimately made. But somehow he could not force himself to believe that old Bronco had borrowed the money. And why was the unscrupulous banker so anxious to take over the Spur Rowel when the Devil's Disciples were killing off men in order to get their ranches? Trotter must know that the men who killed old Bronco and Johnny wanted the Spur Rowel and would likely kill him, too, to get control if he foreclosed on the spread.

Suspicion burned in Steve Hale as he thought of that. Wasn't Cash Trotter afraid of the Disciples? It seemed incredible that the man would risk his life taking over the Spur Rowel when, to all indications, its original owners had been murdered so that the Disciples could control the ranch. The more he puzzled over the situation the more Steve became convinced that Cash Trotter was in league with the killers.

After cleaning up the kitchen and putting the house in order, he lit a cigarette and strolled onto the porch. The shadows were lengthening now as the first lances of night were forming pools of gloom beneath the cottonwoods. He stood listening to the chirp and twitter of the birds. Somewhere a bull-bat croaked. An owl slid lumberingly through the air, came to rest on the ridge of the barn beyond.

Finishing his shuck, he tossed it down and ground it out with his heel. Then he strode briskly to the corral, saddled Shasta and brought him to the house. "We're likely tuh see action tonight, Shasta, ol' son,' he said quietly to the palamino. "Mebbeso it'll be the showdown."

He led the big horse into the shadow pools beneath the trees and left him there. Returning to the porch his sharp ears caught the distant flutter of hoofs. He tensed, his hands dropping grimly to his gun-butts.

His mind worked rapidly. He stole a glance inside the house. In the kitchen a lamp was burning. Supposing this approaching horseman was the advance guard of the Disciples bent upon tricking him? The man might hold him in conversation in front while the legion of Satan stole up behind him.

Leaving the lamp burning, he dove from the porch and ran into the shadow pools to stand beside Shasta beneath the cottonwoods. His guns were out now, ready. There was an awful itch in his trigger fingers. Eyes narrowed, lips tight and thin across his teeth, he waited.

STEVE Hale's eyes were unblinking now. Death lurked in them for someone. Then the rider swung into view, leaping the creek expertly. Instantly his guns dropped. The rider was Terry Holcomb. She swept up to the porch. He saw her glance wildly about the house. Clad in clean Levi's, titian hair cascading down to her shoulders from beneath her five-gallon JB hat, she struck a spark of admiration in Steve's heart. It came to him suddenly that he loved this girl, had always loved her since school days.

A fierce yearning took hold of him. His heart cried out for someone to talk to. Never before had he felt so lonely as now. He was half minded to step out of the shadows when Terry suddenly lit down and started toward the rear of the house, leading her horse.

She stole around the house. Grimly he picked his way through the shadows, on her right flank, to keep her in sight. He saw her pass the hollow cottonwood and go on to the freshly dug graves. There she paused reverently. He thought he detected a faint sob coming from her throat. But he wasn't sure. She stepped away. Then he saw her pause at a clump of brush where she began immediately to search for something. It was dark there now, almost too dark for him to see her every movement. But as she searched along she emerged from the deep shadows and into the brighter light of the night.

Suddenly she bent down to pick up something. A glad little cry came from her lips as she straightened. Then he saw what she held in her hands.

It was the old Bisley Colt's! She took one long look at it and started to run toward her horse which she'd left ground-anchored at the graves. Steve tensed, bunched his muscles to take after her. Then something happened that froze his blood. Like a cougar springing upon its prey, a dark figure wearing a cone-peaked sombrero launched from the

cottonwood branches above her. Chico Megares!

He started forward as Terry screamed, went down. Before he could get in a shot at the pigeon-chested little Mexican without striking the girl, Chico bounded behind a tree, a low laugh pouring from his throat. Then he was gone in the shadows like a wraith. With a curse Steve ran after him, could hear him thrashing through the brush on the left now. He ran that way, pitched recklessly into the brush. Then from behind him he heard Terry give a sharp cry of warning.

"Stephen—look out!"

As if the sky had abruptly caved in upon him, exploding into a myriad of brilliant lights, somethring struck him on the head from behind. His guns flamed into the ground as he sank down, aware that many men were about him, shouting and talking all at once. Through it sheered Terry's horror-filled voice, pleading, crying. There came an insane, cackling laugh from someone and then a series of quick shots. Feeling himself sinking into unconsciousness he thought he heard a squawk of pain. But he wasn't sure. One thing seemed to hammer at his fast-clouding brain—the Devil's Disciples had been watching the house, waiting for this chance to get him. Then all went black and he knew no more until—

He became suddenly aware that he was awfully sick. His head ached as if a thousand little gnomes were hammering at him sharp-spiked hammers. His eyes jerked open, saw nothing. But he became gradually aware that he was moving and that his head was hanging strangely so that his blood rushed to it. Strange sounds greeted his distorted senses and out of these he began to hear the steady beat of hoofs. Nauseated, suffering untold agony, it came to him abruptly that he was tied over a saddle like a sack of grain, hands and legs lashed beneath a horse's belly. And he felt a rag over his eyes, knew he was blindfolded. He worked his feet and his hands and his thongs bit cruelly into his flesh.

Then he heard that cackling, crazy laugh again. And he knew this was the last. The Devil's Disciples had him, had made good their threat to get him. He groaned desperately and cursed himself for allowing himself to have been trapped so easily. The Disciples must have been lurking near all the while he had watched Terry Holcomb's movements among the trees. He realized it would have been easy for them to have surrounded the house while he was busily engaged inside cleaning up. And—it came to him like a blow that perhaps Terry had deliberately tricked him into following her beneath the cottonwoods.

THAT was it! She had seen the light in the house, must have known he was there. Hadn't she boldly ridden up to the porch, lit down and walked her horse carelessly to the rear? She must have known he would follow to keep tab on her movements. Yes. Terry Holcomb had tricked him, had lured him to where the Disciples had been staked out. But what of Chico Megares, The Crow? What had he to do with it? Why had he pounced on Terry?

"We shoulda strung up the galoot," a rider said suddenly. The speaker was a gringo, his voice sounding muffled behind a mask, it seemed. He spoke on: "No use goin' tuh all the trouble uh takin' him tuh Cowskin an' riskin' bein' seen hangin' him in town."

"Keep yore trap shut!' another voice commanded sharply. "Hangin him in town where everybody kin see'll put the fear uh God an' the Disciples in anybody else that figgers tuh buck us."

"I know that, boss," persisted the other, "but it's bad stuff. We're takin' chances bein' so bold. Killin' off them Hales was bad enough. Got Carter an' the hull town riled up. This jigger's hangin' might set off the fireworks agin us. My idea is tuh kill him an' leave him fer the coyotes. Folks'll never know but what he got scared an' sloped out uh the country."

"Yuh got nothin' tuh say about it," the leader shot back, and Steve fought to place his voice. "I'm runnin' this outfit an' what I say goes. Or do yuh want tuh git ringy an' do uh air-jig with the Hale skunk?"

"Yo're the boss," the other bridled with unmasked fear in his tone.

"Yuh bet I am!" laughed the leader. "It's been my way uh doin' things that fetched us this far along the road tuh wealth an' plenty. We ain't pore no more now, are we? Not by uh damn

sight. It won't be long afore we own the hull uh Pecos Valley." And his laugh tailed off in a ghastly cackle.

Steve flinched. There was something mighty familiar about that voice, yet he couldn't be sure. By its muffled sound he thought the man was masked. And the mask distorted it. Then he heard another voice that sent a cold shiver up his spine. Terry Holcomb was riding with this bunch from hell!

"Oh, you dogs!" she bit out scornfully. "You'd kill a man for one single *peso* to add to your coffers! You are drunk with your own power—drunk with human blood. Oh, if I were a man—"

"Yuh ain't," cut in the snarly leader. "Yo're as purty uh filly as I ever laid eyes on."

A gale of laughter beat up from the others, heartless, vicious. And Steve decided that Terry Holcomb was simply a tool of this band against her will.

"Just cut my bonds," the girl cried passionately, "and give me a gun. I'll fight you till I die! Harm Steve Hale and I swear to tell Hamp Carter everything I know—"

"What do yuh know?" the leader laughed. "Not a damn thing, sister. If we thought yuh did—"

"Oh, I know," Terry shot back. "You'd kill me, too. Cowards! Dogs!"

Steve heard the leader give a nasty growl. Then came a sound that made him struggle with his bonds, futilely. It was the slap of the man's hand upon her cheek.

"That'll teach yuh tuh respect yore betters, damn yuh!" the man snarled. "That's only uh sample uh what yo'll git effen yuh don't mind yore tongue. Now where's that ol' Bisley gun yuh was supposed tuh git fer us?"

"I haven't got it," Terry cried, her voice cold with anger and hate. "I told you that little Mexican took it!"

"It was uh frame-up atween yuh an' the Hale jigger an' the greaser, warn't it?" the leader demanded. "Well, we'll git that Mex pronto now an' give him uh air-jig! Now git goin'! We got chores tuh do!"

"Yuh want I should loosen her hands, boss?" a man asked meekly.

"Yeah," replied the leader. "She's harmless. Let her go. We ain't got time tuh listen tuh her jaw-wash!"

THEY went on in silence for a moment and then Steve heard Terry's horse whirl away toward the rear. He gave a sigh of relief. The snarly leader of the cavalcade spoke again.

"Spunky leetle tart," he said, "but I'll tame that out uh her afore long."

"Think she'll talk?" asked another.

"Naw," said the leader with a chuckle. "She don't know nothin'. We didn't let her find out who we was. Nobody knows that but us. But effen she double-crossed us on that Bisley gun business, I'll fix her clock pronto."

"Funny we didn't see that Mex in the tree," said the other. "Musta been watchin' us all the time, an' the gal too. She *did* try tuh run from us when she found the gun, though."

"Shore she did," snapped the leader. "She'll bear watchin' I reckon. Sweet on this Hale kid, I bet, too. But we'll fix him, mebbeso afore we hit town. I'd like tuh git my hands on that pigeon-bellied greaser, though. Damn him, he nicked my gun arm.

Steve would have given much to know who that speaker was. He drew no satisfaction from the thought that Terry had been freed. Having been the tool of this legion of killers, she must know who they were. There must have been something about at least some of them she could recognize, providing, of course, they were Cowskin citizens. Why hadn't she told him all she knew when he had asked, begged her?

Chico Megares had tallied, had shot one of the Disciples in the arm. The Crow was still loyal to the Hales. That much was certain. And in the little Mexican he had a friend he could bank on in a six-gun crisis. He believed Chico had fought as best he could to save him from this band. But having been only one man against at least six, he had been helpless. He wondered why the Mexican had risked his life to get the old Bisley. Certainly he must have known the Disciples were hiding there in the brush. Chico Megares knew many things. Would he take the secret that gun might contain and use it against the Disciples after he, Steve, had died at their hands?

The cavalcade halted suddenly. He heard the riders dismount, talking in low tones. Then he felt them untying his hands and feet from

beneath the horse's belly. They left his wrists thonged tight, but stood him on his feet. Blindfolded, he could see nothing. Nor could he have seen the fist that shot suddenly from the leader of the band, striking him full in the mouth. He stumbled backwards.

"The Gunhawk, huh?" the snarly one clipped. "Yo're a false alarm, Hale. It warn't no chore tuh pull yore teeth back there. Gunhawk! Yuh musta tied that handle onta yoreself. I figgered yuh was goin' tuh be hard tuh take. Say yore prayers, 'cause yo're through now."

Rough hands jerked Steve to his feet. He licked blood from his cut mouth. A noose was thrown over his head, jerked tight around his throat. His blood froze. The thought that Chico had made off with the Bisley and its secrets was no solace to him now.

He heard the hiss of the hangnoose as it was cast over a tree limb. A fierce fire of anger lit within him and he lashed out with a booted foot. It landed against one of the Disciples. With a loud whoosh the air shot from the man's lungs. The renegade folded to the ground, groaning.

Steve Hale was determined to go fighting. But with tied-hard hands, he was helpless except for his feet. He kicked out again, missed. Then a man's fist sent him reeling. He would have fallen but for the quick jerking of the hangnoose. It almost broke his neck.

CHAPTER VII

Hangnoose Medicine

A WILD craving to live gripped him. But he'd show them he could die like a man.

"If I had just one look at yore stinkin' faces!" he gritted in desperation. "Just one look an' a chance tuh plant my lead in 'em, I'd go happy. But yuh'll get yore's afore long. Sooner or later Hamp Carter an' Wyatt an' the boys'll get yore numbers."

Laughter mocked him. The man he'd hooted surged forward, struck him across the face. "Feelin' kinda sick, ain't yuh?" he snarled.

His fist whistled out. But it never landed on Steve Hale's battered face. Instead Steve drove forward his boot toe again. He felt it *chock* into the renegade's groin. This time the killer made no sound when he folded. The rope was jerked again, savagely. He was hauled off his feet into the air. Strangulation twisted his face, made it blue.

The rope burned cruelly into his neck. He thought he saw old Bronco Hale floating suddenly over him, a look of great sadness on his kindly face.

"Dad . . . I'm . . . comin' . . ." he tried to say, but he had no voice. Then abruptly a gun exploded somewhere. He thought it was his tortured lungs letting go. A tremor shook him, then a series of quick gun explosions below beat upon his ears. Somewhere he heard a man shout: "It's The Crow an' his *dorados!*"

He wasn't sure he heard right, for the blood was hammering madly at his temples, creating a terrific din in his ears. Then he felt himself falling. The choking of the rope slackened. He gulped for air. It seemed that he would never strike the ground. But he did so with a jolt that snapped his head, jarred his teeth.

Dazedly he lay upon the ground. Men were shouting. Horses squealed, stomped frenziedly. Blindly he staggered up, ran like a drunken man. He stumbled into a thicket, felt the stab of thorns through his Levi's and shirt.

His wild thoughts were clipped short suddenly. He became aware that he was falling again, sliding, rolling, tumbling down some steep slant. There was a rattle of loose stones. Suddenly his wild descent slowed up and he rolled into some sluggish stream. The cold water revived his spinning senses. He sat up. Gunsounds beat down upon him from somewhere. He wondered about it, struggled out of the water and sat down on the creek bank, working at his bonds.

Behind him he heard the rattling of rocks. Fiercely he jerked up, whirled.

"Stephen—" Terry's voice came to him above the rattle of stones. "Are you hurt?"

He relaxed with a sigh of relief, felt her fumbling with his bonds. "Reckon not much," he said acidly, "but no thanks to yuh."

He heard her sob as his hands came free. Grimly he jerked the blindfold from his eyes, spun to face her. Her face seemed like old ivory in the yellow mono-

tone of light. It was strained, streaked with trail dust, filled with horror. He glared at her.

"Oh, Stephen," she murmured softly, "please trust me. I know what you think—that I tricked you into the hands of the Disciples. But it isn't true. Please believe me."

"Why should I?" he clipped angrily. "You tried to get the Bisley away from me. You wouldn't tell me the identity of those snakes. And when I came to, what do I find? I find you riding with the Disciples."

"I am helpless in their hands, Stephen," she cried, "but I am not in sympathy with them. Isn't the fact that I just rescued you from them enough to prove that?"

"You—you saved me?" he stammered.

"Yes," she said tersely. "When they let me go I rode back to your ranch and found that Mexican in the house. I led him after the Disciples and we fought them away. They ran like dogs."

Steve's eyes widened. "Where's Chico now?" he demanded gruffly.

"I don't know," she replied. "He slipped away mysteriously."

"Did he have that—Bisley gun?" he clipped.

"Yes," she said. "I saw it in his belt."

Steve studied her morosely. Was she telling the truth? "Why don't you tell me who those men are, Terry?" he asked passionately.

She shook her head. "I can't," she said, looking down. He saw fresh horror in her eyes.

His lips curled. "Then mebbeso you can tell me why yo're so interested in gettin' that Bisley—?"

She flung back a vagrant curl. "I can. I wanted to get it for you—before they did. Your father sent me a note asking me to get it. He must have known the Disciples were going to kill him. I first went to the ranch the other night when you returned. I saw the Disciples grouped around the swinging bodies of your kin. I slipped to the hollow tree and got the gun just as the storm broke. One of the Disciples saw me and chased me. I hid the Bisley in the brush and escaped until the following morning when they found me again and gave chase. You came along, frightened them away. And tonight I returned for the gun. The Mexican sprang at me from the tree, took it and ran. Then the Disciples appeared and you were taken. Oh, Stephen, can't you believe in me?"

SHE broke down, sobbing fitfully. A wild craving to take her in his arms seized him. But he restrained himself. After all, there was no telling how much truth lay in her assertions. He regarded her intently, gravely. Somehow he began suddenly to feel that she had told him the truth, that she was for some reason under the ruthless dominance of the Disciples. Perhaps by fear they were using her to further their own schemes in the Pecos. But why? Was it that her own or Parson Holcomb's life was in danger and she was doing their bidding for protection?

"Then Chico's got the Bisley, Terry?" he grunted finally.

She nodded. "Yes," she said. "I'd have given it to you but for him."

"Well, if he's got it, I'll take it away from him," he murmured determinedly. "I don't know why he wants it, or you, or the Disciples. But it must be worth fightin' for."

Terry looked up, pleading in her tear-wet eyes. "Please give it up, Stephen," she begged. "You can't win. To carry on will only mean your death."

He laughed mirthlessly. "I'm carryin' on. The whole thing is narrowin' down now an' the Bisley, I reckon, will tell me somethin' I need tuh know."

She clutched his sleeve. "They'll surely kill you, Stephen," she warned, and he missed that something in her eyes that told of love. "Go back to California and forget."

He shook her hand from him. "They told you to say that, eh?" he clipped bitterly.

"They did not," she flared. "They told me nothing. Please go while you still have a chance."

Steve's voice was vibrant. "I made a vow, and I keep my vows, Terry," he said. "Nothing—not even you—can swerve me."

A heavy sob wrung from Terry's throat and she flung herself into his arms. "Stephen," she cried, "can't you see that I love you?"

Her warm body convulsed against his wet clothing. Her arms stole up about his broad shoulders. He tilted up her

head. Her eyes swam with tears. The love that shone in them stirred his blood. Tenderly he held her tight to him, knew that no matter what she had done, he loved her wildly, madly. Their lips met. The trouble of the Pecos was momentarily forgotten.

"I've got to go, honey," he said tersely. "I must have that Bisley gun."

She sighed resignedly. "I cannot stop you, Stephen," she murmured. "Only can I pray for you."

"How far are we from the ranch?" he queried. "Mebbeso you can help uh gent tuh his hoss."

"I brought Shasta," she said. "He's up there under the trees. And your guns are hanging from the nubbin."

"Thanks, chiquita mio," he murmured.

They climbed out of the creek bosque, made their way through the shadow pools beneath the tree. Shasta and Terry's horse were ground-reined under a cottonwood. They mounted, tarried a moment.

"I shall pray for you, Stephen," she told him fearlessly. "I know you can take care of yourself. But it isn't that altogether. There's something else—something that you will know in time. Good luck, querido."

And she whirled her horse, galloped away. He sat staring after her, puzzled, wondering what she had meant by that—*something else*. What was it?

CHAPTER VIII

The Mystery Gun

SPURRED on by the hope that the old Bisley Colts would contain the answers to his riddles, Steve gigged Shasta higher and higher into the Organs. Palo verde, sage and creosote gave way to scrub pine and stunted piñons. The arroyos became canyons and the slants grew steeper. The smell of pine was in the air. Shasta took the slants easily, yet swiftly and when they reached Black Canyon, darkness enveloped them. He slowed Shasta to a walk up a narrow, rocky trail.

For an hour he rode up the trail, winding higher into the hills. Finally he drew rein and lit down. Ground-anchoring the palamino beside a huge rock, he continued on foot up toward the scarps. Up there he knew lay The Crow's nest. Chico Megares had picked an almost impregnable spot for his Pecos Valley hideaway. It was at the top of a steep incline and was one of nature's natural forts. He remembered it well, having been there before with the little Mexican renegade.

There was little or no trail. He went up gingerly, for he knew Chico could command an unobstructed view of his ascent and from his nest could have successfully fought an army. Toward the top the smell of wood smoke reached his nostrils.

Chico Megares was there, he knew for sure now. Grimly he went on, hugging the rock walls, skirting along ledges. He reached the top, crouched low to study The Crow's hidden nest. Near the entrance of the cave little Chico sat on a rock before a tiny fire, his shoulders drooping.

He sat with his chin resting on one small brown hand, studying with unmasked puzzlement the old Bisley Colts. Grimly Steve palmed his right hand .45, stepped onto the mesa with the tread of a stalking puma. Chico was so intent upon that old Bisley that he heard nothing.

"Pitch up, hombre, or shuck lead!" Steve commanded, stepping forward ominously.

Chico's beady little eyes pinched as he whirled. He shrugged and smiled broadly. With quick leaps Steve was behind him, his gun hard in the small of his back. He disarmed him, shoved his pearl-heeled guns into his own belt. Only then did he stoop to recover the old Bisley which The Crow had dropped.

"Okay, Chico," Steve grinned mirthlessly, triumphantly. "Hands down now. But be mighty careful."

Chico turned, a look of injured pride in his black, beady eyes. "Senor Steve," he murmured, "why you no trust me, eh?"

Steve chuckled.

"I am grateful to you for saving my life, Chico," he said, "but this happens to be my gun an' yuh should've given it to me instead of running away with it."

"You deed not get my message, Senor?" Chico's teeth gleamed.

"What message?" Steve demanded curtly.

"I returned to thee ranch house, Senor," said the little Mexican, "an' left word there for you that I would be up here waiting. You deed not go there, eh, my fran?"

Steve shook his head. "No," he said. "I came straight here. Why were yuh so anxious tuh get this hog-leg, Chico?"

Chicago laughed softly. "Ah, Senor," he purred. "I was eenterested only for you, my fran. An' I must say, I am ver' curious. Your padre he write me get thee gon an' eet will tell you what should be done. But, Senor, the gon she tell not'ings, not'ings at all, an' I am ver' puzzled."

"Well," Steve grunted, "we'll both look for its secrets now, Chico Megares. It must contain uh story uh some kind or dad wouldn't have bothered hidin' it. Nor would the Devil's Disciples want it."

"Nor thees girrul, the Senorita Terry," replied Chico gravely, "I am puzzled weeth her too, Senor Steve. Some tam I theenk mebbeso she een cahoots weeth the Deesciples, eh?"

"What makes yuh think that?"

Chico shrugged. "I do not know, Senor," he said. "Eet ees merely a guess, mebbeso. But we waste time, my fran. Here we fight for thee gon, then stand an' do not'ings when we get eet. Look een the cylinder, Senor."

Steve sat down on a rock. Expertly he looked at the Bisley's cylinder and to his utter amazement discovered that it contained five empty shells and one that had not been fired. He glanced at Chico, puzzled.

"Ees eet not meestifyin', Senor? Valgame! Some wan she play thee treeck, huh so?"

STEVE shook his head. "No," he said. "Dad wouldn't do that. Those shells mean somethin', Chico. I'm sure of it."

"What?" Chico queried.

Steve said nothing, but went on to eject the shells from the gun. He held them in the palm of his hand, studied them, saw that all were not of the same calibre. There were two .44's, three .45's and one .38 which had not been fired. What could it mean?

He realized that no gun on the Spur Rowel had ever been of the .38 calibre. Old Bronc had always used a .44. Johnny's preference had been for the .45.

A sudden thought made the hair bristle on the back of his head. Terry Holcomb carried a .38 calibre Colt's in a .45 frame. Could it be that the unexploded shell indicated in some way to her? No, of course not, he decided.

Chico's hawk-like eyes discovered something.

"Valgame!" he exploded. "Look at thee marks on thee shells, Senor! She looks lak' sometheeng has been scratched on them, eh so?"

Steve held them closer to the fire, turned them over in his palm. And sure enough there were dull scratches on each shell, old enough for the brightness of the brass to have dulled. He had not missed those marks, but had thought that their owners had ridden or walked through brush that had scraped their cartridge belts.

"I've got it, Chico Megares!" he exclaimed. "I've got it!"

"Caramba! What you mak' of eet?"

"Every one uh these shells contain uh man's name, amigo," Steve clipped. "Six shells! Six men! And the six men are the skunks that form the Devil's Disciples! Look here!"

Chico bent down closer. "Valgame!" he swore. "Porque? Who are they?"

Fiercely Steve glared at the shells. He picked up one of them with trembling fingers. Upon it was scratched a name—Wyatt. Killer Burt Wyatt who conducted the Pecos River Bar. Who donated churches; who sought the hand of Terry Holcomb, and who was looked upon as Cowskin's number One citizen and leader of the newly-formed vigilantes organized to fight the Devil's Disciples.

And Killer Burt Wyatt, Steve knew now, was the man behind the murderous guns of that un-Godly legion!

"This one, Chico Megares," he bit out, "has Burt Wyatt's name scratched on it!"

Chico stiffened, looked intently into the other's mask-like face.

"An' this one," Steve picked up another shell and held it into the light, "contains the name of Trotter—banker Cash Trotter. Another one—bearin' the name uh Blanchard! A snake this Bood Blanchard! I knew it the minute I laid eyes on him! An' this one—" he shook the shell in the little Mexican's seamed face, "—Baker, Basalt Baker! This—Holcomb—Parson Holcomb!"

Steve's voice shook. So this was what Terry had hinted that he'd learn in time? Her father a member of the Devil's Disciples? He had it now. She had been working for the sky-skipper's interests, knowing perhaps that the Bisley contained this secret they wanted hidden from him and the world! Damn her!

"An' who ees that wan for, Senor?" Chico queried eagerly.

"The last uh the six," he snarled, "contains a name I don't know, Chico Megares. But I will hunt this man down and kill him as I would a poisonous snake. This name is—Prader!"

"Valgame!" Chico's beady, onyx-like eyes slitted. "Thee *cabron* I have been lookeeng for thees many years—Arch Prader—"

Steve grabbed him by the arm, shook him fiercely. "You know this man, peacock?"

Chico shook his head. "Een name only, Senor," he purred in his deadly voice. "Only een name. Senor Steve, I am hunteeng for thees man. For years I have looked for heem. Een Cowskin we find thee men who keel your keen. There too, we find thees Prader. I keel heem myself, Senor. Thee others—yours. But thees Prader—"

Steve looked close at the heel of the old gun. Abruptly he sat down, shoving the shells into his pocket. A fresh scratch on the set-screw holding the walnut grips of the Bisley together told him that they had been tampered with recently. Furiously he snapped out his Barlow knife and set about removing the grips. They came apart. He saw a tiny piece of paper, folded neatly, hidden in the butt. It read:

Steve:—John trailed the Disciples, gathered a shell from each of their guns. Look for the name on each and get 'em, Steve. Good luck, son, if this reaches you. Dad.

ONCE again the terrible picture of old Bronco and Johnny's bodies swinging in the wind beneath the Spur Rowel cottonwoods conjured in Steve's brain. Johnny, he raged, must have risked his life many times trailing the unholy legion to get this evidence against them, probably picking up the ejected shells at the scenes of their crimes. From one to the other of the Disciples his mind swept and when it came to rest upon Holcomb's name his deadly demeanor changed, slumped. That hurt him. How could such a man, he asked himself silently, ride the owlhoot murder-bent and at the same time wear the cloth of the church?

Steve gripped Chico's slender shoulder. "It's time tuh start hackin' down the poisonous tree, Chico Megares," he clipped fiercely. "Five branches an' a trunk. Five uh the biggest men in Cowskin are attached tuh that trunk which is the leader uh the Devil's Disciples. I go now, old son, tuh hack it down."

Chico's onyx eyes saddened. "Eet ees the Senorita Terry who weel suffer most from thee wrongs of her padre, Senor."

Steve glowered. "I can't help that," he bit out. "My kin never did no wrong an' yet I'm sufferin' for them. The sky-skipper is goin' tuh die!"

Chico holstered his guns as Steve handed them to him. "Now thees senorita, amigo mio—you love her, huh so?"

"Love her?" Steve clipped. "With every ounce uh my blood, Chico."

"Perhaps there ees some way around thees situation," purred the bandido, "weeth wheech you an' she can keep together, yes?"

Steve shook his head.

"Mebbeso, Senor," the little Mexican went on. "I could keel thees *cabron* who preeches the word of Dios an' keels weeth the same ease."

"*Gracias, amigo,*" said Steve gratefully. "I'll do my own killin' in this case. I've sworn to do that over the dead bodies uh my kin. I can't cheap out on an oath." He extended his hand which the little Mexican took in a firm clasp. "Adios, amigo. See yuh in hell!"

Chico's eyes glazed with a misty look. "I know how eet feels to lose someone ver' much loved, Senor," he said. "That too, drove me on thees trail of death an' hate. You are a ver' good man, Senor. They weel drive you on thee owlhoot for these keelings. When eet ees all over an' you still leeve, I weel be waiting along thee Rio weeth my *dorados* to take you een our arms as our fran'. *Vaya con Dios, amigo.*"

CHAPTER IX

Who Is Arch Prader?

STEVE HALE rode straight to the Spur Rowel. The first lances of dawn were streaking the eastern skies when he arrived. The place looked forlorn, deserted in the early morning.

Entering the house the first thing he saw was the note, written in Spanish, Chico Megares had left for him. It lay on the kitchen table, telling of Chico's going to the old hideout in the Organs.

He spent the morning loafing around the house and cleaning up. In fresh Levi's and clean shirt, felt better.

All through the morning one question was uppermost in his mind. Who was Arch Prader? Was there a man in Cowskin by that name? Or was it a fictious one? Or was Arch Prader masquerading under an alias?

Finally he saddled Shasta again, pulled his Stetson down over his eyes to shade them from the blinding sun, and gigged resolutely toward Cowskin. As he rode his mind tussled with the problem confronting him. Cowskin, he reasoned, would never believe him if he went boldly into town and pointed out its six leading citizens as the Devil's Disciples. They would laugh at him, call him crazy.

He rode on, convinced that he must do the task confronting him alone and unaided. And he realized he must make no mistake. Johnny might have been dogged, methodical, yet no man is infallible. Even Johnny could have slipped up with his identification in one or two instances. So he felt that each of the men named on the cartridges must be given a chance to explain how his name came to be there.

Of them all, Parson Holcomb gave him the most worry. To kill the sanctimonious renegade would result in the smashing of four lives, Holcomb's, Terry's, Matty's and his own. And Steve Hale knew he loved Terry Holcomb more than anything on earth.

He visioned Terry as depising him, hating him. Shoulders slumped, head drooping, he rode on morosely. He did not press Shasta. The sun was sliding well to the west when he reached the crest of the rise from which he had seen Terry fleeing from the Disciples. He curbed his horse, paused to look over the town in the distance. Buildings waved distortedly in the heat waves. Gaudy colors bedecked them. He recalled suddenly that Terry had told him there was to be a two-day church benefit and social in town. Two days of fun during which would be staged a miniature rodeo, a public dance, a baseball game and shooting matches, the proceeds going to the little church.

During those two days all the citizens of Cowskin and its surrounding country would be there. The Devil's Disciples would be there, too.

He sat straight, stiff-backed in his hand-tooled saddle as he gigged the last leg of his journey into town. As he expected, the streets were thronged with people. Gay bunting bedecked the false-fronted clapboard buildings. Bright parasols, hoop-skirts and broadcloth were much in evidence. Men paraded up and down the main street, lined with stalls where lemonade and gaudy doodads were sold.

He sensed an undercurrent of fear in this gaiety. No one could completely forget the violence perpetrated recently. The menfolk wore their guns with their Sunday best. A church social, this celebration, yet men went armed.

It was all inescapable to Steve as he gigged on toward Stumpy Joe's corral. The wrinkled face of the crazy old hostler puckered like a dried prune. He laughed insanely.

"Didn't fit yuh, huh, younker?" he cackled. "Waal, they'll try again. They never give up, button. See yuh all gunned fer trouble."

"An' welcomin' it, Stumpy," murmured Steve. "I ain't cheapin' out on anything."

"A gent wouldn't be yella tuh cheap out uh death," drivelled Joe. "That's uh hint, button. Uh leetle horned toad done tol' me this mornin' yuh'd be a-comin' along. That same frawg went an' tol' the Disciples. They'll cook yuh in yore own grease. Heh! Heh! Heh!"

"I hope they choke on 'em then," growled Steve. "Know a gent name uh Arch Prader, Stumpy?"

Stumpy Joe's watery old eyes bugged wide, then narrowed. Steve could have sworn his face blanched a bit.

"Prader? Now that's uh funny thing, Hale. I used tuh know uh gent by that

name, but it's been long ago—"

"Where is he now?" Steve clipped in.

"Daid, button. Prader is daid, daid uh fright when a scorpion bit him."

"Aw, hell!" Steve exploded. "Might uh known yuh wouldn't tell it scary. What's doing up the street in that corral up there?"

"That?" Stumpy's eyes shuttled to a small corral thrown together in an empty lot toward the center of town. About it were gathered many men. "Wyatt's got a jughaid name uh Skyrocket that he says cain't be rid an' lays twenty tuh one on it. Yuh feelin' like takin' some uh that dinero?"

"Reckon not today, Stumpy," said Steve. "I got chores tuh do 'fore I risk bein' killed off by uh wild bronc. But Wyatt dunno what he's sayin' if he says the nag can't be rode."

"Go ride him, button," urged the oldster cunningly. "I'd like tuh see yuh win."

HE led Shasta away and his spike-tipped pegleg glistened at every step. Steve headed toward the corral up the street. As he went the odds offered by Wyatt thrilled him. In his wallet reposed a little more than $500, the last of his California earnings. Not enough by a long ways to clear that lien Cash Trotter held against the Spur Rowel, assuming it was a legitimate claim. If it was, Trotter's heirs or the bank would take over the ranch if he, Steve, failed to make good on the loan. Eight thousand dollars. If he bet his $500 and won at twenty to one, he'd have more than enough money to clear the ranch.

And too, there was a chance that, in winning, he could so anger Burt Wyatt that the killer would make some break that would identify himself as one of the Devil's Disciples. He decided to have a fling at Skyrocket.

Jake Fannin, owner of the Seven Bar Seven, grabbed him by the arm. "Howdy, Steve," the cowman greeted. "Heard yuh was back. How about yuh forkin' this cross between uh ringtailed pole-cat an' a lop-eared comet Wyatt's claimin' cain't be rid fer thirty seconds? I been hopin' yuh'd come along an' I got two hundred pesos tuh lay on yuh."

"'Lo, Jake," grunted Steve. "Why not one uh yor boys stomp the nag?"

"My best snapper was jes' throwed, Steve," said Fannin sadly. "I lost three hundred. Give us uh run fer our dough, kid."

But Wyatt frowned at Steve. Their eyes clashed. "Yeah," the saloonman sneered. "You kin do it, Hale. A gunhawk ought tuh be able tuh match his gun stuff on a hawss. Skyrocket's the easiest nag in the country tuh ride if—yuh ain't yella."

The rebuke stabbed Steve like a stiletto.

"All right, fella," Steve clipped. He snatched out his wallet, extracted from it a sheaf of currency which he handed to Jake Fannin. "There she is—five hundred pesos sayin' I can ride yore horse thirty seconds, rakin' him with my spurs fore an' aft. Put up yore dinero, Wyatt, or shuck yore boots an' go home."

The crowd laughed gleefully. Jake Fannin's voice sheered through the chorus. "C'mon, Wyatt," he said. "I'm addin' two hundred tuh that. Put up yore money—fourteen thousand—effen yuh got that much."

"I got that much," Wyatt grated abruptly. "Gimme all the bets yuh want tuh make. What I can't cover now, I'll give notes on the bank. Easiest dough I ever won."

While the bets were being made, Jake Fannin acting as stake-holder, Steve studied the horse in the corral. A tall, muscular brute, Skyrocket. But after all, a horse. And this one was meaner than any he'd seen in a long time. A killer, this one, he judged, would stomp a thrown rider to death if he could. He swung his eyes upon the man holding the horse's halter. It was Bood Blanchard and he was grinning expectantly. He waved at Steve. "You next, fella?" he called. Steve nodded, turned back to Wyatt and found Basalt Baker's heavy eyes burning upon him. No greeting passed, strangely enough. Baker simply stared at him and Steve was quick to note the pose of the killer in his attitude. His right hand rested on the butt of his gun.

Steve looked about for Cash Trotter. But the banker was not there. He looked back at the outlaw horse again. Coal-black, was Skyrocket. Killer though he was, he was the kind of a horse that strikes instant admiration in a love of mounts. A shame, Steve thought, such a gallant beast had been allowed to become an outlaw.

Burt Wyatt's voice attracted Steve's attention as he called to Blanchard. "Steve Hale up next, Bood," he yelled. "Bets are all down an' coppered. Take him, Hale, an' git uh ride tuh boothill!"

Steve climbed through the corral bars, helped Blanchard blindfold the mount. Skyrocket was already saddled. The blindfold was needed until the rider mounted. Then the wrangler would jerk it away and Steve would be out for his ride. He was ready in a jiffy. But the instant he put his foot in the stirrup, Skyrocket plunged sideways, kicked at him.

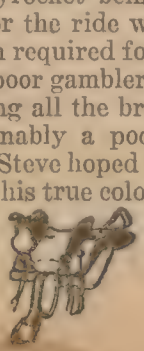
THEY tried to quiet the animal, but Skyrocket was too boogered and wild for two men to handle. Burt Wyatt slipped through the corral bars and came forward to help. Steve's amber-flecked eyes roamed over the saloonman appraisingly. He gave a sudden start as he noticed a heavy bulge underneath Wyatt's frock-coat sleeve. He knew it wasn't a hideout gun. It looked like Wyatt's arm was bandaged, and Chico Megares had winged one of the Disciples!

"Climb up, Hale," Wyatt's voice sheered through his thoughts. "We'll hold him until yuh git set. All ready now!"

Steeling himself to the pounding he anticipated from the outlaw horse, Steve again placed his foot in the stirrup. Skyrocket quivered, squealed viciously and started plunging. Then Steve swung up. As he did so he saw Bood Blanchard's hand slide under the saddle and come away. A look of great satisfaction spread over the cattle dealer's swarthy face. Skyrocket curvetted. Blanchard and Wyatt let go, and the ride was on.

"Thirty seconds, Hale!" Wyatt yelled, scrambling for the bars. "Rake him fore an' aft. Touch leather with yore hands an' yo're disqualified!"

Steve knew Wyatt was taking small chances of Skyrocket being ridden, for the time set for the ride was fifteen seconds more than required for rodeo bronc-stomping. A poor gambler, Wyatt, a tinhorn demanding all the breaks. And he was unquestionably a poor loser. But that was what Steve hoped for. If he lost he might show his true color.



CHAPTER X

Buckaroo Justice

BEFORE the first neck-snapping leap of Skyrocket was completed, Steve Hale knew that Bood Blanchard's hand had not gone beneath the saddle for nothing. He could tell by the way the mount cut loose like a crazy whirlwind that something had been placed beneath that saddle so that the moment his weight pressed down, the horse would feel sharp pain, making him a raging, unmanageable equine maniac. And he knew that Blanchard had not put an ordinary burr there, a vicious trick by unscrupulous horse owners to make their outlaws do their worst. Blanchard, evidently in cahoots with Wyatt to make money out of this one, had placed a little square of leather with carpet tacks driven through it under the saddle so that the points would press down into the horse's flesh with Steve's weight.

In that split second it required Skyrocket to uncoil in a mighty leap that sent both horse and rider high into the air, Steve realized that Bood Blanchard and Burt Wyatt were taking this means of killing him.

His body went taut to meet the onslaught of the crazed beast, and his slitted eyes fixed on the corded shoulder muscles of the horse to get the advance notice which way the steel springs would twist and writhe. Skyrocket sun-fished furiously, took off across the little corral like mad, rocketing, twisting, the outlaw did his best to sink fangs into the legs of the rider.

Steve's neck snapped, his chin crashing against his chest with almost every leap. He raked the horse from withers to flank. Skyrocket shot high into the air, shook himself, pin-wheeled and swallowed his tail. He came down with a jolt that almost cracked Steve's spine, then skyrocketed across the corral.

The crowd gathered there fled like mad, expecting the mad brute to crash into the bars or leap over them. But Skyrocket hedged in time, wheeled and cracked away in the opposite direction. The crowd gasped in awe. But Steve heard nothing but the pound of his blood, the thunder of those mad hoofs,

the screams of the man-killer. Blood flowed freely from his nostrils. His teeth were clenched tight, cheeks sunk. Tears swam in his eyes from wind and violence.

Vaguely he wondered how long he had been on the ride. It seemed like ages. He was riding the best ride of his career, topping the meanest man-killer he had ever encountered.

It seemed like he had been subjected to the torture of this madened beast for years. Yet he knew he had scarcely been riding for the required thirty seconds. And he knew he couldn't last much longer. Skyrocket's jarring leaps were dulling his senses. He could feel the starch wilt from his legs, sensed dimly that the whirling sea of spectators could now see daylight between him and the saddle each time the mount sun-fished.

Then Skyrocket went into a deadly pinwheel. The horse reared up, spun and came down on all four legs with a jolt that threw his chin so hard against his chest that for an instant the world seemed to go dark. Like a dog trying to catch its tail, the maddened animal whirled. Steve fought to clear the dark fog from his brain, but the roaring noise in his ears grew louder with each instant. He knew he was licked now. And then it happened.

Skyrocket shot into the air like a glossy black thunderbolt. Steve was aware that he had left the saddle. He dropped the reins, relaxed and let the animal toss him on the next jump. Skyrocket obliged with a vicious squeal.

Purposely relaxing to spare himself broken bones when he hit the ground, Steve shot from the saddle. He landed heavily on his back, striking his head in the dirt. For an instant he was dazed. Then the squealing of Skyrocket sheered through his whirling brain. He glanced up. Skyrocket had bucked off a few yards, whirled. Now the crazed horse was bearing down upon him, nostrils flaring, teeth bared, hoofs beating savagely.

AWARE that the insane outlaw was bent on trampling him into the dust, there was nothing left for Steve to do but go for his gun. It tore at his heart to have to kill such a beautiful animal. But his own life hung in the balance. The terrific beating slowed his reflexes somewhat. Skyrocket was almost upon him when his gun came out. Then he had to roll desperately. Flying hoofs missed him by a hair. His gun was rocketing. Twice he fired, both slugs striking the crazed horse just behind the ear as he roared past. The black shuddered to a halt, switched its tail aimlessly, and pitched over. Immediately a great howl from the spectators beat up.

Above it Steve heard Killer Wyatt's curses as the saloonman rushed up, gesturing wildly. Steve was on his feet, chocking his gun into its holster. Wyatt flung him around furiously.

"What's the idea, you?" the saloonman demanded. "You was supposed tuh ride that nag, Hale—not shoot him."

Steve glared at the man, his jaws firmset. Bood Blanchard ran up, glowering. "That was a damn dirty trick, fella," the cattle dealer squawked. "Yore ride didn't call fer no gun stuff. Why'd yuh do that?"

"I had tuh do it tuh save my life," Steve rapped back. "It was yore own faults, damn yuh! If yuh hadn't put tacks under the saddle, I'd uh rode him to uh standstill. No, you couldn't risk losin' yore dinero."

"That's a lie, Hale!" rasped Wyatt. "I warn't near the jughead!"

"Easy, Wyatt,' Steve clipped. "Careful what yuh say. You didn't have tuh go near. It was Blanchard's chore tuh put tacks under the saddle—"

Jake Fannin, face writhing with anger, rushed up after a quick inspection of the horse, and held out a patch of leather with a half dozen or so long sharp tacks stuck through it. The points were bloody. "Yeah," he roared furiously, "an' I saw Bood shove this pad under the kak! Pay off, Wyatt!"

"I will like hell!" Wyatt snarled. "Hale kilt the nag afore he completed the ride uh thirty seconds! What yuh think I am, Fannin . . . crazy?"

"He made the ride!" flung back Fannin. "I clocked him myself! Thirty-three seconds afore the hawss spilt him! Pay off, or—"

Steve saw Blanchard edging away toward the crowd, but said nothing. His fight now was with Kill Wyatt and—he knew by the looks of the saloonman's bodyguard who slipped up to his side, that there would be at least two men

against him in this showdown. The man's brows were drawn down and his hand was splayed out over the heel of his gun.

Wyatt observed several of Fannin's punchers angling up to back their boss's demands. "All right," he bridled. "I'll pay yore bets, Fannin. But I'm keepin' Hale's dinero in payment for the hoss he jes' kilt."

White hot anger seized Steve. "Keep yore fingers offen that cutter, Deke Gorman," Matty Holcomb shrilled at Wyatt's bodyguard, and his Sharp's rifle was swung up. "This looks like uh fight between Steve an' Wyatt—pussonal. Move a muscle an' I'll salivate yuh!"

Steve flashed the youngster a look of thanks and saw Gorman's hand leave his gun-butt.

"Yo're payin' back my dinero, Wyatt," Steve ground out, "with every cent uh my winnin's. Fannin, as stakeholder in this deal, I demand my money from yuh."

"Pay it, Jake, an'—yore name'll be on the bulletin board by sundown!" Wyatt let loose unguardedly, and Steve knew that the break had come. Killer Wyatt had made a threat in behalf of the Devil's Disciples. Johnny had not been wrong!

Jake Fannin's face went white. He looked at Steve helplessly. Steve's eyes were merciless. "Hand it over, Fannin!" he commanded. "I'm only takin' what's mine, an' then I'm goin' tuh give yuh somethin', Wyatt!"

Fannin paid off with shaking hands while Wyatt burned him with his murderous eyes. The currency was shoved into Steves hand and he pocketed it. Then his fingers fished in his pocket, came out holding an empty pistol cartridge. He handed it to Wyatt, watched the saloonman look blankly at the shell.

"That's yore,'s, Wyatt," he said grimly. "Yore name is on it."

Wyatt rolled the shell between his fingers. Curiously the bodyguard, Gorman, looked over his shoulder. Then Wyatt's eyes slitted. "So it has," he said, puzzled. "What's the joke—where'd yuh git this?"

Steve's voice was soft. "Johnny Hale found it at the scene uh one uh yore crimes, Wyatt," he ground out. "It's one uh the secrets uh that Bisley Colt's! There was six shells in the chamber, Burt—one for each uh the Devil's Disciples!"

KILLER WYATT'S face reddened, his eyes writhed with quick fear. Steve knew that he had at last uncovered a member of the Disciples. The fear in Wyatt's eyes was like a confession.

In front of him now stood one of the men who had participated in the murder of old Bronco and Johnny Hale. Perhaps Gorman, too, had had a hand in that hanging. Steve knew he would have to fight both of these men. And he realized that Wyatt had only to deny the charges and he, Steve, would never be able to prove his point with nothing to back him up but an empty cartridge with his name scratched upon it. Hamp Carter would never believe his accusations. There was only one thing left for him to do.

He looked toward the crowd for Bood Blanchard. The cattle-dealer had sneaked out of the trouble like a whipped cur. Then out of the sides of his eyes he saw Wyatt's body slump into a crouch.

"You ain't got uh chance in hell tuh win, kid," he sneered. "If I'd a' had my way, yuh'd be—"

"Cold fruit on a cottonwood limb," added Steve darkly. "Thanks tuh Chico Megares yuh didnt have yore way."

"I'm gettin' it now," Wyatt spat. "I'm takin' yore taw with hot lead—"

There was a made scramble of the crowd to get out of the way. Fannin brushed little Matty away and before the youngster could side with Steve, the fight was on. Wyatt's hand darted to his gun. Gorman hurled himself aside, clawing at the cutters tied-hard at his massive thighs. Then Steve Hale was matching those lightning draws. The Gunhawk was in action.

His guns were bucking in his hands. Death seared along Steve's ribs, burned like a hot iron as Wyatt's first bullet creased him. Sharp pains surged through him, then with cold precision he rocked his hammers.

Deke Gorman was a clock-tick behind Wyatt. This favored Steve and his first slugs drilled Wyatt squarely in the brisket before swinging on the bodyguard. Gorman's guns were just coming up. Then his heavy body seemed to

rise into the air as Spur Rowel lead pierced him through the throat. His death scream echoed over the town. He toppled across Wyatt's still body, writhed in agony for an instant, then lay motionless.

There came an angry murmur from friends of Wyatt and Gorman in the crowd. Steve swung his weapons. "Anybody want tuh come an' take up where they left off?" he demanded savagely, hoping to hear Bood Blanchard's voice accepting the offer. And the cattle dealer's yell floated back from somewhere behind the crowd.

"Somebody run an' git Hamp Carter!" Blanchard screamed. "Don't let him git away with killin' Burt! Gun him down! I'll give a thousand pesos reward for him—dead or alive!"

Wildly Steve looked for the man. But Blanchard was well hidden. And Steve saw immediately that Wyatt had many friends in Cowskin, most of them, he felt, ignorant of his membership in the Devil's Disciples. Hands darted to gunbutts. But Steve's hard voice and threatening weapons checked them.

"First man that pulls hardware will get enough lead tuh sink him tuh China," he ground out. Then little Matty Holcomb sprang to his side, Sharp's rifle up and ready.

"I'm sidin' Steve Hale," the youngster yelled. "Root hawg—or chaw lead!"

"Better not get mixed up in this, Matty," Steve warned, backing off across the street with the youngster at his side. "If these ringy short horns want smoke music, I'll oblige. Haul off, son—yo're buckin' the Devil's Disciples!"

He had a glimpse of Basalt Baker as he ended. He made a quick snap-shot at the renegade, missed because Baker ducked.

"I'll buck 'em with yuh, Steve," the youngster shot back. I ain't afeared uh the yella dogs now that yo're here—"

Bood Blanchard's voice interrupted. "Gun him down! A thousand pesos tuh the gent that fetches me his scalp!"

The crowd, urged on by thought of the reward, surged after Steve and Matty. But now they had crossed the street, stood at the corner of an alley. Steve saw Bood in the mob, haranguing it, but there was no chance for a shot without hitting others. The crowd edged after them as they backed down the alley.

"Can't go with me, Matty," he said sternly. "This is a man's job. You run along home an' keep out uh trouble."

MATTY gave him a hurt look. "Aw, shucks, Steve," he said plaintively. "Lemme ride with yuh, huh?"

"Sorry, little pardner," Steve ground out. "Them belly-crawlin' sidewinders'll be huntin' me down pronto now. You don't want the Disciples campin' on yore tail, do yuh? No, son—you take a quick out uh this an' watch over yore sister."

"Awright, Steve," said Matty, his slender shoulders drooping. "I'll go. Well, good luck, an' watch out for yore ha'r. Blanchard's set on takin' yore sculp. So long, amigo!"

He darted through the rear door of the General Store. A salvo of shots beat at Steve. But they went wild. He ran toward the opposite end of the alley. But quickly he hedged up when he saw that a knot of men lurked there waiting for him. Then he saw Sheriff Hamp Carter swing into view, say something to the men, and heard them running for their horses. A posse was being organized. Yet none of the men bent on collecting the reward had nerve enough to follow him into the alley. But they had him cut off from Shasta.

Yells beat up from the two streets. A thousand dollars bounty changed the whole complexion of the town. Bood Blanchard had done his work well. And Steve knew that there would be no court trial for him if he was ever captured.

The alley closed at both ends, his eyes roved over the roofs above him. A flight of rickety stairs ascended one of the buildings. Quickly he leaped toward them, ascended. In a jiffy he was leaping over the fire wall and speeding across the roofs.

The sun was gone now. The mountains to the west were edged with orange lances. In a moment the shadows would thicken. He crouched down at the edge of the building overlooking the front street. Already a posse was mounted with Hamp Carter ordering them into the alley. He smiled grimly, crouched back, then continued his flight over the roofs until he came to a vacant lot. Beyond he could see Parson Holcomb's

house. A light was guttering in the window. Carter would hardly look for him there.

And it would give him a chance to settle with the renegade sky-pilot, he thought grimly as he let himself down a drain spout to the lot. He sped across the open ground, dodged under the trees that shaded Terry's home. Then he was knocking at the door. Inside he heard a movement. He drew back into the shadows, palming his gun.

CHAPTER XI

The Hand of Chico

IT was dark. Steve Hale crouched and waited. Then Terry Holcomb, carrying a lighted lamp, opened the door.

"Who is there?" she demanded softly, stepping out. "Oh," she gasped. Her hand flew to her throat. "Stephen?"

"Yeah," he stepped forward. "Where's your father, Terry?"

Her face paled. He went up town to see what the shooting was about," she said. "What's wrong, Stephen?"

Steve's reply was clipped short by the beat of hoofs approaching from town. Quickly he blew out the lamp. Terry gasped as Carter and his posse roared past the house. "Oh, Stephen—the shooting—you?"

He nodded grimly. "I've just shot it out with Burt Wyatt an' Deke Gorman," he confessed bitterly. "Both are dead. Hamp Carter's lookin' for me."

Terry swallowed hard. "Oh!" she gasped.

"I had to do it, Terry," he said softly. "They drew first, had every chance. Thank God they left me alive to finish what I've set out tuh do."

His voice rose passionately. She gasped at its sharp-edged bitterness. She stared at him unbelievingly. "You've killed—Burt?" she queried.

"Yeah," he ground out. "Does it matter—to you?"

"Why do you come here?" she evaded, breathing hard.

"They never look for the enemy in the middle of their camp," he charged brutally. "You know why I came here, Terry Holcomb. If you don't, ask your father. He knows."

A startled cry wrung from her constricted throat.

"You can't—you can't do it, Stephen!" she pleaded. "Oh, God, please—"

"Can't do what?"

"You've come to kill him, I know," she cried. "But you shan't I won't let you!"

"Then he *is* a member of the Devil's Disciples, eh?"

A tight sob came from Terry's lips.

"I don't care how you do it," Steve ground out, "but get your father out of the Pecos! Pack yore stuff an' take him away before I see him. If I do—I swear before the God he has blasphemed, to kill him as a member of the Disciples!"

"You wouldn't dare," Terry flared heatedly.

"Wouldn't I?" he gritted. "Show him to me now an' see!"

Steve breathed heavily, furiously. But his heart bled for the suffering Terry was fighting. Then she was speaking in a choked voice.

"Oh, Stephen," she said, pleadingly. "I begged you to leave here for your own good. I thought when you kissed me that we would be drawn closer and perhaps see some way out of this awful mess. I've been wrong, for there is no way. There can be nothing between us but bitterness and hatred if you harm my father."

"The way I just said is open," he clipped. "You're getting the same chance you gave me. I'm paying you back by giving your father a chance he didn't give dad an' Johnny—"

"My blood ties are as strong as yours," she breathed hard. "I'll fight for them! We are not leaving the Pecos—now or ever." She turned and strode through the door. Then she paused, turned, and her eyes gleamed. "I don't want to have your blood on my hands, Steve Hale," she continued, "but if it's to save my father's life, I'll kill you if you are still here when I return with a gun . . ."

His head was bowed, shoulders drooping. An awful weight seem to bear down upon him.

Suddenly he was aware that she stood before him, a gun held unwaveringly in her hand. The firm set of Terry's lips betrayed the strength of her own family ties. It broke him, body and soul, for a moment.

"Well," he muttered at length, "why don't you shoot me an' have it over with? It'll end all trouble—for both of us."

Terry's pulse pounded in her throat and she felt all her range-bred courage ebbing from her body. The sight of the stalwart, strong figure of Steve Hale so humble and morose before her, tore at her heart. Her gun quivered in her hand, dropped down to her side.

"I can't do it, Stephen," he sobbed. "No matter what you did. Please go before it is too late and you are dead by other hands."

"We thrashed all that out before," he said humbly. "I'll do what I promised, or find a soon grave."

She was in his arms before she knew it, sobbing on his shoulder, her gun dropped to the floor. "No, no, Stephen," her voice came passionately. "You can't. Let us go—just you and me—before they kill you. Take me anywhere."

HER body convulsed against his. He tilted her face, probed her glazed eyes. Within them he saw all the passionate pleading a woman can betray when the lives of her loved ones are at stake.

"You will never understand my father's connection with the Disciples, Stephen," she whispered. "Don't try and perhaps we can be happy together. You will not believe me, I know, when I say father has been a victim of circumstances, compelled through fear to fraternize with those dogs. Oh, Stephen, can't you see? Blanchard holds him under his thumb."

"Blanchard?" Steve's eyes glittered. "Why?"

She melted in his arms. Her sobs came in a torrent. He did not press her further. Gently he stroked her hair. His blood pounded. Like the thrust of a dagger, hate stabbed through him for Bood Blanchard and the rest. But he began to understand Holcomb's connection with the legion of the devil. Blanchard must have something on him, something that the parson was terribly afraid to have exposed.

"We'll both stay in Cowskin," he said in a voice that was strong again. "I'm goin' tuh see this thing through. Now—I've got a date with Bood Blanchard."

"Oh, no, Stephen," Terry cried. "You can't! You haven't a chance. Blanchard is surrounded by hired killers."

His jaw set determinedly. "No use tryin' tuh stop me, Terry," he said tersely. "You look out for yore father. Keep him away from Blanchard an' the rest. When I've settled with them, we'll weigh up yore claims against what I'm goin' tuh force Blanchard tuh tell me. Then we'll see what's to be done."

"I'll do all I can, Stephen," she breathed. "Only please believe me when I say father is in the grip of those men—can't pull away without them killing him."

Footsteps came from the front of the house, mixing with the voices of men. Steve's hands darted for his guns. Then the men started around the walk to the rear of the house. His blood congealed. He thrust Terry inside the house, kissed her quickly and whirled to find Parson Holcomb regarding him from the end of the porch. He was flanked by a half dozen men whom Steve knew were looking for his scalp.

He dove for the shadows beneath the cottonwoods. Holcomb's voice rose stentoriously, calling upon him to wait. But Steve kept on. Then another voice sheered the gloom.

"Get him!" one of the others screamed. "It's The Gunhawk!"

A pistol roared from the porch. Steve felt the hot breath of the slug. Gun flame stabbed the night again. Something struck Steve on the side of the head like the blow of a hammer. He pitched forward. Blackness overcame him.

Into a realm of pain he finally emerged. His head ached. He stirred and found himself lying on a pile of straw. Through his dull mind flashed the thought that once again the Devil's Disciples had him. That meant the end, unquestionably. With an effort he propped himself into a sitting posture, tried to blink the darkness from his eyes. He felt of his head. It was bandaged. He knew he was sitting in somebody's barn. A dimmed lantern was burning on an upturned flour barrel nearby. Beside it sat a small figure, hunched under a vari-colored serape. Upon his head was a cone-peaked sombrero. And breaking that leathery face into a thousand wrinkles, Chico Megares smiled.

Steve blinked incerdulously and then The Crow was speaking in his soft, purring voice. "Ah, Senor Steve," he said, "you are wan hard hombre to keel, eh

so? I am watching when they shoot at the Holcomb hacienda. Ver' queek I know these hombres want the scalp for wheech to earn wan thousan' pesos. So what you think, Senor?"

Steve squinted at him suspiciously. "You want the bounty yoreself, eh, Chico?"

"Ver' much wrong, Senor," laughed the little Mexican. "I save you from the bounty-hunters—not for the reward, Senor, but for the Senorita Holcomb!"

Steve grinned at him warmly despite his pain. He got shakily to his feet, thrust out his hand. "Dang yuh, Chico," he mumbled, "you drift more places than a tumbleweed on the desert! Thanks, an' all that, ol' son. I owe yuh two-bits for savin' my life."

"An' I'll owe yuh *viente centavos* change," purred Chico humorously. "A man's life she only worth a nickel these days een Cowskeen."

STEVE smiled broady. "Reckon I ain't hurt bad, huh?" he felt his head again.

"Joost a scratch, Senor," Chico assured him, "but thee man who gave eet to you, I keel heem."

Steve gave a violent start. "Why—who was it?" he demanded. "The—the sky-skipper?"

"No, no, no, no." Chico held up his hand. "I no keel the preacher. Heem no shoot at you. I not know hees name, but I see hem when you shoot the Senor Wyatt an' he's gon-dog, Gorman, een the corral."

"You know about that, then?"

"Chico Megares knows many theengs, Senor," said The Crow cryptically. "Thees time I see weeth my own eyes. Valgame! I am hiding between thee buildings when the shooteeng starts. Wyatt heem almost keel you, but when he deed not an Gorman was late on thee draw, I knew my gons need not interfere. A ver' good fight, my fran, an' the Disciples weel fear the return of the Gunhawk, you betcha. Thee crowd she mak' me ver' angry, Senor, for leestening to Bood Blanchard. I am like to keel that mongrel breed, but the crowd she een the way. The leetle *muchacho* weeth the beeg rifle, heem ver' brave. But heem ver' foolish also."

"Yeah," said Steve. "I had tuh chase him away from me. Wanted tuh help me fight. That's Terry's kid brother, Matty Holcomb. Johnny was right when he branded those shells, Chico Megares! Wyatt and Blanchard proved it by their own actions. But Bood sneaked out, then offered a thousand pesos for my head. Cowskin wants that bounty."

Chico nodded. "They are like sheeps, Senor," he said in disgust. "When wan does wan thing, thee others she follow, even to thee death. Mebbeso they learn too late that Steve Hale heem fight their battles when they got no nerve to fight for themselves, eh so?"

"They don't know what they're doin', Chico," said Steve quietly. "Blanchard turned their heads. Besides, they don't know what a low down skunk he is. Where are we, anyhow?"

"I breeng you on my ver' fast horse to Wyatt's own barn een back of thee Pecos saloon," smiled Chico, handing him a full canteen.

Steve took the water and drank deeply. He guessed the slug had just creased him and knocked him out.

"Brought me here on a horse, eh?" he queried. "Tell me about it."

"I was watching the Holcomb hacienda to see what I could see," said The Crow. "I see you come, see you weeth the Senorita on the porch. Then come thee men an' they shoot you. I tell you, Senor, eet was like shooting leetle balls on streengs when I shoot at them. They ron like hell—'cept wan. Then I leeft you on my horse an' away we go."

Steve squinted at the little man, wondering what great strength lay in his small arms to enable him to lift a hundred and ninety pounds of dead weight to a horse's back.

"What about the Seenorita, Chico," he said. "You saw her?"

"Deed I see her, amigo mio?" Chico warmed up. "Valgame! No soon I get you on my horse than she come ronning after me, shooteeng like the ver' devil. Mebbeso she think the Devil's Disciples have catch you."

Steve grinned. How was Terry to know that Chico wasn't one of the Devil's Disciples? She had shot to protect the man she loved. A great thankfulness welled up within him.

"Plenty work yet tuh be done, Chico," he said with sudden grimness. "If I'm not mistaken, the Disciples'll be gatherin' together in town tonight to talk

over the finish uh Wyatt an' Gorman. I'm goin' tuh find 'em an' listen to their schemes. Mebbeso I'll corral the whole bunch uh them in one place long enough tuh shoot the lights out uh them."

Chico looked startled. "I am afraid for you, Senor," he said simply. The warmth in his dark eyes touched Steve.

"Don't worry about me, pardner," he said tersely. "Wait here. I'll be back . . ."

"You need the help, amigo mio . . ."

Steve shook his head. "Together we might not be cautious enough. I got a feelin' that crowd'll be surrounded by a bunch uh gunslicks. In that case, one man is better'n an army."

He looked to his guns, then stepped to the barn door. Chico was beside him. "You are ver' foolish, Senor Steve," he protested. "You are wan against ver' many. I have fear—"

"Forget it," said Steve. "Jes' you stay here an' if I come back a-hoofin' it, yuh can help me then."

Then he was gone, leaving the wily border renegade staring after him through narrowed eyes.

CHAPTER XII

Claws of the Gunhawk

THE moon had lumbered down to the scarps of the Organs and was standing now like a huge mound of silver on the crown of Baldy Peak. The night was cool as Steve Hale cautiously made his way down the dark street behind the Pecos River Bar. It was very late, he knew. And alone he reasoned out where the remaining five of the Devil's Disciples would be most likely to be gathered. He had no way of knowing for sure that they would gather together this night. But he felt in his bones they would. The deaths of Wyatt and Gorman would have to be discussed. And it was sure they would know why their deaths had come about.

So Steve decided he'd look into Bood Blanchard's place first. If the Disciples were not in conference there, then there would be no harm in looking over Cash Trotter's bank. The night was quiet. Cowskin was tucked under its blankets at this hour. The town hunkered in the gloom like some grotesque conglomeration of monsters bedded down for the night.

Stealthily he kept to the shadows. As he neared the front street, he paused, whipped off his hat and peered around the corner. No use taking chances on being seen by nocturnal wanderers. But there was no sign of animation there except at Sheriff Hamp Carter's law office. In front stood Carter's pony, head drooping, dozing. A square of light splashed on the boardwalk of the office, evidence that the lawman was still up.

Idly Steve wondered why he was burning such late oil. In another hour or so dawn would be at hand, yet Hamp was still at work. Steve paced along the street toward the cattle dealer's office. It loomed dark and forbidding before him. There was no sign of life anywhere about it and he was about to go on up the street to the bank when his sharp eyes detected a tiny crack of light showing through the rent of a tight-drawn blind. His blood quickened. He'd guessed right. Cautiously he stole toward the window and as he hugged the wall he heard the low murmur of voices.

He knew that the balance of the Devil's Disciples were in conference there, assembled in the room behind that blind. The voices were so low in pitch that he barely heard them. And he could make out nothing that was being said. Minutely he searched the wall for a chance hole through which he might see and hear. But it was not until he got between Blanchard's and the next building that he found a spot. The bricks in front of the place had been placed there to give the building a *front*. The rear was of pine boards. With his knife he pried out a loose knot. But he could see no one through it. The Disciples were out of view. He placed his ear to the hole, listened intently. The voices were clear now, though low as if the men there were afraid to be heard within a few feet of themselves.

Parson Holcomb's pious voice sheered at him through the hole.

"When men try tuh rule by fear an' violence," the sky-skipper was intoning, "they only beget death for themselves. Brethren, the Good Book says that what yuh sow ye shall reap. Wyatt reaped death from the seeds uh death. I think we ought tuh quit this business. The

Gunhawk will turn us all into pillars uh lead. Mark my words he—"

"Shut up, yuh dang fool!" cut in an uneasy voice. "We ain't quittin' until every stick uh the Pecos Valley belongs tuh us. We're within reach uh controllin' everything here an' we ain't gunna give up now—not for a dozen Steve Hales! It was jes' luck that he did fer Burt an' Gorman. 'Sides, he wouldn't uh done it if it hadn't been fer that damn lop-eared brat uh yores, skipper! Yuh better put that whelp under lock an' key or he'll be buzzard bait damn quick!"

"Yeah," said another throatily, "an' his gal, too. Iffen she'd uh played square with us, we'd a had that ol' Bisley Colt's an' Hale wouldn't a been none the wiser. You ain't got nothin' tuh say in this, Holcomb, an' the less yuh say the better it'll be fer yore health. Two double crossers in one litter is plenty, if yuh savvy gun-talk!"

Steve heard Holcomb laugh thinly. "Giveth in jest, sayeth the Good Book—" the parson began.

"Take a hitch in yore jaw with that stuff, yuh sanctimonious mule!" interrupted a heavy tone, sneeringly. "They's more truth'n poetry in what Basalt Baker jes' said. We ought tuh take it out on yuh fer yore whelp helpin' Hale git away. It's all yore fault an' I got uh notion tuh take up where Wyatt left off with yore Terry filly. I'd hold her down an' tame her!"

An ominous silence followed those words. Steve would have sworn Bood Blanchard had spoken. He would have given much to see their faces now. He pictured the Disciples as being indeed frightened over the abrupt finish of Burt Wyatt and Deke Gorman. And he began to harbor a new hate for Holcomb for allowing Terry's name to be mentioned thus and say nothing about it. The man must be spineless, he thought—or patently afraid of the men around him.

NOW Cash Trotter's voice was beating strongly in his ears. "Jes' fergit about the wimmen a spell," he said anxiously. "We ain't got time for that kinda stuff. We got tuh figger out some way tuh git the Spur Rowel. I hear tell Hale won heavy off Wyatt afore killin' his hawss, got enough out uh it tuh pay up that note if he's minded tuh."

A gale of laughter spilled from someone, tailing off into a ghastly chuckle. Steve would have sworn it came from Stumpy Joe's crazy lips.

"Let him pay off!" the man sobered with a growl. "Then we'll have the dinero an' the ranch too. We'll frame up another note on the place. It ought tuh be easy what with Bood's man, Inky Hawkins, bein' the best pen-slinger outside uh jail. Now I want yuh tuh transfer that Spur Rowel over tuh me, Cash, pronto, statin' yuh sold it tuh me. Hale won't know the difference an' after Inky works over them papers even ol' Bronco wouldn't know but what he signed 'em. That'll give me the Spur Rowel, the Sashweight an' the Cross X. When I git holt uh Jake Fannin's Seven Bar Seven, I'll string 'em all into one big spread. Then we'll run out the little fellas an' own the hull damn valley."

Then Trotter's voice came again, weakly. "You been takin' everything in yore name," he said. "Jes' where do the rest of us come in on this land business?"

The other man, apparently the leader of the bunch, laughed weirdly. "You'll all git yores," he said in a patronizing tone. "We'll split on the final tally."

"It wouldn't be healthy for yuh tuh try cheapin' out on us," cut in Blanchard's crisp voice. "We got worryin' tuh do now about The Gunhawk. He's got tuh be taken. I thought they'd git him today when I offered that thousand reward."

"Yeah," echoed Trotter. "That gent annoys me. I'll be afraid tuh go home in the dark, knowin' he's got us all tagged an' mebbeso spraddled out for killin'. You can't tell me he don't know who the Disciples are now. The killin' uh Wyatt shows it. Hale wouldn't jes' up an' kill a gent over a hawss."

"We ain't got nothin' tuh fear from him, Cash," snapped Bood. "He daren't show his face in town. Every hombre in Cowskin is goin' gun-hung fer his scalp. Quick thinkin' uh me, warn't it?"

"Yo're smart all right," the leader sneered. "We'd uh had him salted down fer boothill iffen yuh hadn't cheaped out on Wyatt when the trouble started. Dammit, Blanchard, yuh should've stayed an' gunned him down."

Steve heard Blanchard give a low curse. Then Holcomb was speaking

again. "A chain breaketh at its weakest link, so sayeth the Good Book," he intoned. "The blood of men turns to water when fear of another strikes at their sinful souls."

"Aw, hell," Blanchard swore and Steve heard him shove his chair back along the floor. "Yo're a damn fool! I warn't afraid uh the skunk. I'll git him yet, mark my words!"

"I hope somebody does—quick," said Trotter, rising. "This has been profitable. We can't let him cut in or bust us up. Waal, I'll go get them papers for Inky tuh work on. See yuh gents later."

"Yeah, have 'em ready tuh deliver tuh me in the mornin' early," said the leader. "I'll be waitin'."

Chairs scraped. The conference was over, Steve realized. His whole body flooded with rage and hate for these men and their diabolical scheming. But there was room within him for happiness at the knowledge that the note against the Spur Rowel was a forgery. He had suspected as much. Now it was proved. But to protect his ranch from being stolen from him, he realized that he had to get hold of that faked note before Cash Trotter handed it over to Inky Hawkins for doctoring. Once the forger transferred the papers to this diabolical leader of the Disciples and perhaps recorded them legally, there would be little chance of ever keeping the Spur Rowel.

And now Trotter was going to the bank. Steve Hale's brows clouded and his nostrils flared. Good! The crooked little banker was playing into his hands. But first—he must throw a scare into that unholy legion, start the virus of fear creeping into their murderous hearts. It would all be in his, Steve's, favor to have them nervous, jumpy. He stepped back, drew a stubby pencil from his pocket, fished for a piece of paper. Then he scribbled a warning note hastily:

YOU'RE THE NEXT TO
DIE—CASH TROTTER!
(Signed) The Gunhawk

Grimly he picked up a small rock underfoot and wrapped the message around it. Then with no hesitancy he hurled both through the window. There came a soft tinkle of glass as the rock crashed into the room. He heard the missile strike the floor.

THEN he was coyoting through the gloom toward the bank, knowing that the renegades dared not create a disturbance without fetching Sheriff Hamp Carter from his law office. Carter would in all probability demand an explanation for their nocturnal meeting and become suspicious. And it was plain that the Disciples did not want to be seen or heard.

Running stiff-leggedly, Steve chuckled as he visualized the looks on the faces at that clandestine gathering. They'd pick up the note. "It's from the Gunhawk!" the finder would exclaim. "He's gonna kill yuh next, Trotter!"

Cash Trotter would cringe. Bood Blanchard would bluster and curse. Basalt Baker would stare, his big hand splayed out over the heel of his gun. Parson Holcomb would probably utter some passage from the Good Book and get it all wrong. And the leader, whoever he was that Johnny had branded as Arch Prader, would grin to himself, for if he, Steve, was any judge of men, this one was scheming to take everything. The death of Cash Trotter would mean only one thing to him—one more less to split with in the final tally!

Steve pictured Cash's face turning to the color of old ivory when he learned he was the next to die. He would become inarticulate. He would give a terrified squawk and his piggish little eyes would pop like glass marbles.

Those thoughts brought grim amusement within Steve as he cut into an alley and came to a halt in the rear of the bank. With little time to spare before the first lances of dawn broke over the Organs, he worked swiftly with his Barlow knife. It was the better part of five minutes before he dug his way through to the window-catch, unlocked it. Then with a shove he thrust the window open and climbed inside.

The bank was pitch dark inside in this darkest hour before the break of day routed away the night. He felt his way along the mahogany counter until he came to a thin partition enclosing Trotter's tiny office. He remembered the lay of the interior well, having been in there many times before leaving the Spur Rowel to roam west. It was only the matter of a minute's search to find the banker's desk. He pulled out the drawers and taking batches of papers at a

time, he glanced over them under the guttering light of a match. Shielding the flame from the street by a cupped hand, he saw that most of the papers were loans to the various Pecos Valley ranchers. There were a few deeds and mortgages that did not concern him. But he felt certain that a good many of them were forged.

He went through them swiftly, but failed to find the papers he sought. Thinking he might have missed them, he was about to look them over again when he heard heavy bootsteps on the walk outside. He shrank back. Two men passed the front window, paused at the doors. Then he heard Cash Trotter's key clicking in the lock. Slipping behind a partition Steve wondered who was accompanying the banker on his visit to the bank. He had recognized Trotter. But the man with him he did not know. Quietly he hunkered down, gun palmed, to wait.

Cash and his companion entered immediately. "It's a hell of a note tuh git uh gent out a bed at this hour, Trotter!" the man with the banker complained sleepily. "Shucks! I jes' got tuh sleep!"

"Quit yore squawkin," retorted Trotter. "Ain't I payin' yuh good money tuh act as lookout durin' the day? Yuh shouldn't mind so much me askin' yuh tuh bodyguard me uh spell. Can't yuh see my life's in danger, Bull Frayne? Hale threatened tuh kill me tonight. From now on I want yuh should keep within six feet uh me all the time. If yuh see anybody suspicious, plug him. I'll pay yuh extry an' give yuh a bonus if yuh salivate The Gunhawk!"

"The Gunhawk?" Frayne gasped. "Yuh mean the jigger that did for Wyatt an' Gorman?"

"The same!" snapped Cash, bumping into some object as they came toward the desk.

"Jeez," Frayne murmured. "I wouldn't have a chance agin that lead-squirtin' galoot. Wyatt was the fastest gunny in Cowskin."

"Show a yaller streak an' I'll git somebody else," clipped Cash. "I always thought yuh had guts."

"Don't worry, boss," said the other. "I got 'em tuh spare. Let's turn on the lights. Hell, ain't yuh got a right in yore bank?"

"Yo're a fool," charged Trotter. "Carter's still up. He'd see the light an' come investigatin'. All yuh got tuh do is flip guns for me. An' don't ask questions."

FRAYNE said no more and Steve could see them both as they approached, their forms cutting black chunks out of the gloom. They passed within a few inches of him. His hair bristled, it seemed. He wondered if they could hear the pound of his heart. He stole a glance around the partition. They were in the office now and Cash was standing in front of the big safe vault. That the papers he sought were in that safe, Steve hadn't a doubt now. Cash meant to get them, and then—

"Stand in front uh the window," the banker ordered Frayne, "an' light a match so's it won't show out front. I want tuh open this safe."

Frayne did as bidden, his huge bulk looming grotesquely in the window. He thumbed a match into flame, cupped it in his big hands. Steve jerked back as Cash hunkered down in front of the combination like a vulture over carrion. The guttering light threw a weird glow over his uneasy features.

Stealthily Steve studied the man. Every line in his face was sharp, brutal—niggardly. Bull Frayne, he saw, was of the bully type, a man who would rather kill from behind than risk the front. Then the combination was clicking. The vault door swung open. Steve's body became rigid as Frayne's match guttered out and he lit another. He held his breath, fearful lest they hear it.

He saw that the vault was jammed with books, papers and—stacked currency and silver. Frayne's eyes bugged, held upon that cache of wealth. Trotter's pudgy hands went through a batch of papers, his greasy forehead beaded with sweat. From behind the partition Steve could almost have reached out and touched him.

Cash took some papers from the sheaf, shoved the others back and shut the vault door. With a quick twist of his fingers he locked the combination, then straightened.

Steve stood up, his gun palmed. As he did so his rowels scraped against the partition. Cash Trotter stiffened as if stabbed in the back. Bull Frayne gave

a curse and flung his match to the floor. But Steve was prepared. He flipped another match into flame and stood in its light at the door of the office, his gun trained on the pair.

"Make a move you two an' it's boot-hill," he clipped softly. "You, Trotter —give me the Spur Rowel papers!"

Cash Trotter's face was bloodless. He almost swallowed his tongue as he mouthed: "This is a holdup, Hale. Robbery!"

Steve glowered. "You ought tuh know," he admonished, his voice barbed with threat. "Now, guns on the floor before this match dies out. Quick!"

Cash Trotter knew there would be no compromise. Frayne was quicker to comply, however. Steve grinned. The fellow hadn't the nerve of a wood-tick. Their guns thumped on the floor and with a quick flip of his foot, Steve sent them spinning under the safe. The match in his hand burned to his fingers. He dropped it. But dawn was breaking now. The bank lightened. He could see clearly now. And Cash's face was white as he felt the chill of death down his back. His hands trembled. The papers he held rattled in his grasp.

Steve chuckled at his fear and discomfort. "No need tuh shake like that, Cash," he gritted. "I never killed uh man yet in cold blood. But of course yuh wouldn't know anything about givin' a gent a break, would yuh? I'll take those papers. Heard tell they were forged."

"That's a lie—" Trotter blustered suddenly.

"I wouldn't say that," snapped Steve. "I listened in on yore meetin' tonight. That's how I happened tuh be here waitin' for yuh."

His hand shot out, snatched the papers from the banker's shaking fist. He stuffed them inside his shirt.

"It's uh outrage!" Trotter stormed. "I'll have Hamp Carter on you, Steve Hale!"

"Think he could do what—you an' the rest uh the Disciples failed, Cash?" Steve shot back coolly, his fingers fishing in his shirt pocket. He extracted an empty cartridge, handed it over without once taking his eyes from the pair of cruelsters. "Here's a present for yuh. Yore name's wrote on it, Cash."

And he thumbed another match so that the banker could see the markings upon the shell. Cash turned it over and over in his trembling fingers. "What's the meanin' uh this?" he demanded.

"It's yore death warrant, Cash," ground out Steve. "Yore name's on it. My brother Johnny picked it up after yuh'd ejected it at the scene uh one uh yore crimes. It's yore turn tuh die, Cash. If yuh got any prayers tuh say, better start now."

Cash Trotter's pasty face went even whiter, then green about the mouth. His whole body shook with sudden, uncontrollable fear. He looked about wildly for some avenue of escape. He tried to speak to Frayne, but fear choked his voice.

ALL the while Frayne was stealthily bunching his slab muscles. Steve saw him crouch slightly, knew what was coming. But reluctant to kill an unarmed man, he struck with the barrel of his gun as Frayne uncoiled at him. It caught him squarely across the head. There was a sickening crunch. Blood spurted. He fell like a poled ox.

"That'll give yuh a permanent part in yore hair tuh remember me by, Frayne!" Steve shot, and out of the tails of his eyes saw Cash's hand streaking inside his coat for a hideout gun. He jerked aside just in time and the banker's slug whistled through the space where his head had been a clock-tick before.

But in leaping, he tripped over Frayne's prone body, sprawled headlong to the floor. Like a drowning man grasping at a straw, Cash let out a squawk and leaped behind his desk. Before he could get in another shot, Steve had scrambled to the side of the vault. Cash went wild then and fired frenziedly, his slugs plunking solidly against the steel plates.

Crouching low, Steve heard the sounds of pounding feet outside. Somebody yelled and windows banged up as the townspeople, awakened by the shots, peered into the street.

Steve peered around the vault and could see Trotter's knee humping past the corner of the desk. He smiled grimly and leaped forward. The crooked banker's gun belched almost in his face and gun-flame burned his skin. Then his gun was rocketing at Trotter.

He heard the *chock* of lead striking flesh and bone, then Cash jerked to his full height, cursing. He struggled frantically to get in another shot. Chill-eyed, Steve triggered again. Cash's gun exploded. His bullet, splintered into the ceiling. And then all color was draining from his face, spilling out of a small hole between his eyes. His lips went slack, chin sagged loosely. His piggish little eyes bugged, then he blinked owlishly as death slowed his reflexes. He wilted like a melted candle, dead when he struck the floor.

CHAPTER XIII

The Wrath of Cowskin

STEVE HALE stared about him and realized suddenly that to be found in the bank would be extremely bad. He didn't have an alibi in the world and stolen papers were inside his shirt. He was in the bank and had just killed a man. Hamp Carter could certainly get a conviction on that sort of evidence if he came and found him there.

Men seemed to be running toward the bank from all directions now. Cowskin might think the vault had been robbed. Without giving attention to Frayne, Steve reached to the desk, picked up paper and pencil. Hurriedly he scratched out a message:

YOU'RE NEXT, BOOD BLANCHARD.
(Signed) The Gunhawk.

He shoved that grim warning into Trotter's still hand and ran to the rear window he had jimmied. A quick glance told him no one had come up that way. The alley was deserted. He spraddled outside and headed back toward the barn where he had left Chico Megares. There he would spend the day resting and plotting how to bring Bood Blanchard and the remaining Disciples under his guns.

Dawn was painting the eastern ranges with pastel colors now. Behind him he heard someone shout, and dodged between two buildings. As he reached the street he saw men surging into the bank. Then he slowed his pace to a walk and then turned into a narrow alley between the Pecos River Bar and the building next to it. Sure that he had not been seen, he ran on toward the barn standing well in the rear of the saloon.

As he went he derived grim satisfaction from knowing that two of the Devil's Disciples had been dealt the kind of justice they deserved. Four more remained to be reckoned with. His work was one-third finished. Would he last long enough to bring them all under his guns?

As he looked into the future he realized that perhaps the hardest men of the legion still lived. Bood Blanchard had to be overcome. And there was Basalt Baker, the gunman mine operator. Next would come Arch Prader, probably the leader of the band and the hardest nut to crack. He wondered again who Prader was. Nobody in Cowskin recognized that name. He knew that this man was hiding behind another. Yet he felt sure that sooner or later he would uncover his true identity.

Last but not least in the array of renegades he had to face was Parson Holcomb. The thought sickened him. But from what he had overheard at the meeting, Holcomb was in as deep as the rest of them despite his hypocritical piousness. He drew some satisfaction from the knowledge that through Terry he had given Holcomb a chance to get out before he came for him. If the sky-skipper refused to take that chance, then it was simply too bad for him. He either had to go—or die.

There were still other obstacles in his path, he remembered as he went on. Frayne would name him as the bank robber, killer of another of Cowskin's most prominent citizens. The town would be up in arms against him more than ever now. The remaining Disciples would infuriate it to greater effort to take him, dead or alive. Perhaps Blanchard would now raise the bounty. There was grim irony here. The very persons he labored to save from the ruthless Disciples—turned against him. In his efforts to wipe out the scourge of the Pecos, he would be outlawed, driven into the land of dim trails by the very people he risked his life to protect. Driven into the land where only the owlhoot lingo is spoken, where chill-eyed hombres used the moon for a sun and carried on their

lawless activities beneath it.

A pang of bitter remorse came within him as Terry's lovely face conjured in his mind. Even if the love between them developed, blossomed into the beautiful flower of romance, he knew it would be futile. He could not ask her to become the bride of an outlaw, a man hunted by the law, a bounty on his head. By his acts and the carrying out of his promise to his dead kin, he was throwing away all chances of a lasting happiness with Terry Holcomb. It hurt him sorely. But there was no way out of it now, that he could see. And there was savagery in the set of his jaws when he told himself abruptly that he did not want to back out of this fight.

He was in it to stay. And stay he would until the last member of the Devil's Desciples had died and he had axed off the stump of the poisonous tree to which they were attached.

His throat constricted as he approached the barn. The dismal hoot of an owl lifted from his lips. Chico Megares would know the meaning of that call—the signal of men riding outlaw trails. But no answer floated back. He entered the barn as the first crimson lances of the sun lifted into the sky. Inside he stopped dead, sensed something wrong. The place spilled over with quiet.

"Chico!" he called softly, thinking the little Mexican was probably asleep in some hidden corner.

ONLY silence answered. Chico, he decided, had departed on another of his secret departures. He heeled quietly toward a stall that was filled with hay, intending to burrow beneath it and sleep the day through.

But as he started to make a hole in the pile a sharp, cold voice chilled his blood, whipped his body stiff and sent his hands darting toward his gun-heels.

"I don't want tuh kill yuh, Steve. I'll do it iffen yuh make me by goin' for yore hardware. Move yore hands up—slow now, unless yuh want me tuh shuck lead at where yore suspenders cross!"

His hands fell away from his weapons and lifted slowly. He didn't need to turn to know who had him covered. He knew that voice and he knew that Sheriff Hamp Carter never spoke idly. He meant what he said.

Steve remained rigid as the grim-faced lawdog slipped up behind him, shoved the cold muzzle of his .44 into the small of his back. Then he was shucking his guns and Steve Hale knew he was in a tight fix now. Swiftly his mind worked. Carter would accuse him of many things now—among them murder. There was no doubt in his mind the sheriff would laugh at his lame attempt to identify the renegades. He would be allowed no chance to prove it.

He wondered how Carter had reached the barn so fast—instead of going to the bank. Surely he must have known that he would return to this hiding place. One thought leaped in his mind—Chico Megares had betrayed him! Why? For the bounty? A slow hatred began to build up within him, and then Carter's chill voice was sheering his thoughts.

"Turn around now, Steve," the lawdog commanded. "Put on these bracelets an' we'll treat yuh to a free flop in the pailhouse. Sorry, son. Yuh fetched it on yorself."

Steve turned, faced the grizzeld old lawdog. Fatigue of his many night rides and the worry of his job showed plainly in his tired face. His eyes were bloodshot and sunken from loss of sleep. A stubble of beard, stiff as pig bristles, made his face look dirty.

"How'd yuh know I was comin' here, Hamp?" Steve murmured morosely.

"Yuh'd be surprised, younker," said the lawdog evasively. "C'mon now. I want tuh see what the shootin's been about."

"I can tell yuh that," said Steve softly. "You'll learn about it later an' mebbeso be told everything but the truth. I was in the bank gettin' some paper Cash Trotter had forged again my ranch . . ."

Carter laughed softly, mirthlessly. "Jes' papers, son?" he muttered. "Careful what yuh say, son, as I'll use it agin yuh." Then his voice softened. A morose look settled over his face. "Steve," he went on like a father. "I'd never have believed it iffen somebody gave it tuh me in writin'. That's honest. Your dad was my friend, Steve, an' a better man never lived. Strange, such a docile gent as him could whelp uh killer an' bank-buster, ain't it? California musta made yuh plenty ringy an'

I reckon they's many uh sheriff out there wonderin' who the hell the Gunhawk is. But yuh can't git away with it in Cowskin, son. I got tuh take yuh tuh jail."

Steve felt the bitterness in the lawman's tone. Hamp Carter had always been a friend of the Hales, had gone a long way in helping Old Bronco teach him, Steve, and Johnny the three R's of rangeland—riding, roping and—rythmatrigger. If there was only some way to prove him that he was in the right. But that would be like trying to talk him out of this arrest. Hamp Carter couldn't be talked out of anything like that. He knew it would be useless to argue with him. His words would slide off the lawdog's back like water from an alligator. So he decided to wait until the sheriff was in a better mood than now. Perhaps then he would listen. He made no protest when Carter snapped the cuffs to his wrists and herded him outside.

They went to the bank. Men were crowded out in front. And seated on the walk in front was Bull Frayne, his bloody head in his hands. He jerked erect as someone said: "Here come Carter, an' he's got Hale!" Then he was leaping to his feet, the lust to kill flaming in his eyes. He made a lunge forward. Quick as lightning Carter's .44 came out.

"I'll kill that son of uh coyote!" Frayne bellowed, hurling himself at Steve, his arms flailing like pistons. tons. "The dirty hock-wallered—"

Hamp's gun jabbed him in the middle, jerked him up. "Hold it, Frayne!" the lawman snapped. " 'Nother bust-loose like that an' I'll part yore hair on the side uh yore head!"

"That's the skunk that gun-whipped me in the bank!" Frayne raged furiously. "He robbed Cash an' then kilt him down in cold blood! Lemme at him! I'm gunna gut-shoot him!"

AND he made another lunge at Steve. Carter's gun lifted, fell. Bull Frayne took it on the skull for the second time in the space of half an hour. He stretched full length in the dust, inert—senseless. Carter chocked his gun back into its holster and turned to the crowd.

"Any more uh yuh feelin' like some uh the same?" he clipped. "First gent puts a hand on my prisoner goes up fer a stretch or takes a one-way ride tuh boothill!" He swung on a deputy. "Take Frayne home an' fix him up!" he ordered. "See that he keeps his jaws slack ontil court time."

The deputy nodded and with the help of another man, carried Frayne away. Steve couldn't be sure, but he thought he detected some humor in Carter's eyes as he looked after them. The lawman had never liked nor trusted Bull Frayne, a bully of the meanest breed. He turned to Steve.

"What'd yuh take from the bank, Steve?" he demanded.

Steve reached inside his shirt. Carter's eyes narrowed warningly.

"Don't worry," Steve murmured. "I'm only gettin' the papers yuh wanted. I got no hideout gun, Hamp."

He handed the papers over. Carter's eyes pinched again as he scanned them. Then he was ordering the crowd to make way for him into the bank. He herded Steve in front. Unfriendly eyes swept the prisoner. A low murmur beat through the crowd, and he knew that the fury of Cowskin against him was beginning to boil. All the town needed now, he felt, was someone to urge it on with a little flowery oratory.

They were jostling him when he entered the bank and Carter was glaring at the mob. As he entered Steve glimpsed Bood Blanchard and Basalt Baker coming up the street. Not far behind them came Parson Holcomb and Terry, followed by young Matty. It seemed that the news of his arrest had been carried over town on the morning breeze, so swiftly did it travel.

Inside, the bank was just as he had left it. Cash Trotter lay in the same spot, although the warning note to Blanchard was gone from his stiff hand. Carter took one good look at the banker, then shook his head at Steve. "Looks bad for yuh, kid," he said soberly. "Cash was respected in Cowskin, same as Wyatt. Killin' two uh our foremost business men ain't likely tuh make the town love yuh none."

Steve said nothing as he was herded back outside. At the door Carter ordered a man to keep watch inside until he jailed his prisoner. Dark looks burned at Steve as he stood there. Someone threw a stone that barely missed him and

crashed through the window. Taunts were beginning to fly at him. Bood Blanchard sneered from the edge of the crowd, and Basalt Baker's unblinking eyes burned into him. The mine operator's hand rested on his gunbutt and Steve knew that only Carter's presence kept him from drawing it.

"Wait long enough an' yuh'll always ketch the rat when it comes out uh its hole," he snarled viciously. "Fella, yore days uh devilin' an' killin' honest folks is over. Yo're due tuh be cold fruit hanging from uh rafter afore yo're much older."

"It wouldn't be the first time yuh an' yore crowd lynched a man" Steve shot back.

Blanchard's face paled. But Baker remained unshaken by this accusation. He simply stared. "If it warn't for a lady here, I'd step up there an' separate yore legs from yore belly!"

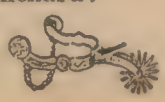
Steve's face went livid with fury. "Not with my hands free, yuh wouldn't Baker," he snapped.

Baker started forward. Bood checked him. Steve saw Terry's face flush with anxiety and new hatred boiled within him at the way Blanchard suddenly took her arm. "This won't be nice for yuh tuh watch, Miss Holcomb," he said, and Steve could see him run his fingers over her. "That jigger's due fer uh air-jig. Yuh want I should see yuh home, first?"

"I can take care of myself, thank you," Terry drew away from him. "And I'd thank you to keep your paws off me!"

"Mebbe yuh'll think different after he's gone tuh boothill," snarled Blanchard angrily. "I'm gunna see to it that he pays fer his sins!"

"No yuh ain't, Blanchard!" Carter cut in. "I'm law-doggin' this town an' when I take a man tuh jail, he's safe ontil the jury hangs him. Now git this straight, yuh idiots—Steve Hale is subject tuh fair an' square trial when the case comes up. Ontil then nothin's gunna happen tuh him. If any o' yuh are buildin' up tuh take the law in yore own hands, fergit it. I'm postin' triple guard at the jail in case yuh get notions. An' I'm givin' orders tuh shoot the first gent that starts nosin' around. Tha's plain, ain't it—Blanchard?"



BOOD glared back sullenly and made no reply. Then someone handed him the note Steve had left in Cash's dead hand. The cattle dealer let out a rowl and waved the missive above his head. "Here's another threat by that skunk" he bellowed. "Had me marked for uh killin'! But we'll never let him mark another gent, will we?"

"Not by uh damn sight!" echoed Basalt Baker. "String him up now an' stop some shyster lawyer from springin' him!"

Carter's guns were out like lightning, waving over the crowd. The mob fell back and a path opened. Steve was herded through it toward the jailhouse, Carter's guns covering him. A low undertone beat up and Steve understood that it would take more than Hamp's warnings to save him from being lynched.

He caught Terry's eyes and the anguish in them hurt deeply. They were tear-drenched, red from crying. She gave a little wave at him, then buried her face against the Parson's chest. Holcomb stared after him, his head shaking sadly.

The crowd surged in behind Carter and Steve followed them to the very door of the jailhouse. Taunts and epithets were flung at them. And Bood Blanchard's voice, urging them on, beat above them. But Sheriff Carter seemed unruffled had dealt with mobs like this before, knew how to handle them.

CHAPTER XIV

Terry Saves a Life

INSIDE the jailhouse, Steve and Carter were met by two deputies, Buck Bristol and Harv Temple. Immediately Hamp ordered them to guard the prisoner, turn and turn about. They nodded and went to the door to look over the threatening mob while Carter himself escorted Steve to a cell back in the corridor. Outside they could hear the murmur of the crowd and it seemed to be growing every minute. Steve was thrust into a small, square cage and the iron door was clanked shut behind him.

"Put yore paws through the bars an' I'll take off them cuffs," Carter ordered, taking no chances. It amused Steve

somewhat that the sheriff thought him so dangerous. "An' don't worry none about them crazy fools outside. If they git onery I'll pinch a couple uh them. I ain't never lost a prisoner yet an' I ain't gonna start learnin' new tricks now."

"I'm not worried, Hamp," Steve gritted, as Buck hackled up to stand guard, a rifle cradled in his arm. "But I'd like tuh blow off a little steam in this matter. It's not that I'm afraid uh the judge or the consequences. I wouldn't have gone in so deep if I was. I had my chance tuh run out on my dad an' brother, an' didn't take it. I made pretty shore who I was gonna kill before I did it, too. Send yor deputy away for a minute. I want tuh tell yuh somethin' that I want only you tuh hear."

Carter's stern eyes searched his face for signs of trickery and saw only helplessness. Satisfied, he ordered Bristol away. When he was out of ear-shot Steve's voice came, passion-filled. He hurried over an account of past events, of his finding the bodies of his kin at the Spur Rowel. He told of the masked riders chasing Terry and how he had routed them with his bullets. For the first time Carter learned that the Disciples had had him, Steve, set for lynching and how Chico Megares and Terry Holcomb had rescued him. Patiently and with emphasis he explained how the old Bisley Colt's had unveiled the mystery about the Disciples, shedding it away like shucked corn.

Grimly Steve showed the lawdog the remaining four cartridges—three empties and one unfired. Carter saw each name upon them, gasped, listened for more. He heard Steve say that while he believed Holcomb to be a member of the unholy legion, he felt sure the sky-skipper had never fired a shot in any of their raids. Else why had Johnny planted a loaded cartridge for him in the Bisley?

As emotion grew within him, Steve paced his cell. Bitterly he spoke of his desires to see Cowskin cleaned of the ugly hydra head of crime. Of his dreams to take over the Spur Rowel and make it into a great cattle ranch with Terry Holcomb as his bride.

In a tone that was chill and dripping with venom, he spoke of the killing of Burt Wyatt and Deke Gorman. He told Carter how they had tricked him into risking his life, planted the tacks beneath their killer horse's saddle. How, after he'd made the ride and shot the animal to save his neck, Wyatt had refused to pay off.

He told with contempt about the meeting in Blanchard's office early that morning, and how Arch Prader was scheming to take over Jake Fannin's Seven Bar Seven, combining it with others and making a mighty spread out of it. Then they were to run out the little fellows and—Arch Prader would own the whole Pecos Valley. He spoke of Inky Hawkins and his pen-slick, how Cash was to have given Inky the papers now in Carter's pocket, for a forged transfer of ownership of the Spur Rowel to Prader. That was why he'd entered the bank—to get those forged papers before Inky did his dirty work of robbing him.

". . . so that's how she stands, Hamp," he ended finally. "You've got the papers that I took from Cash. Now I'm in your hands and ready tuh take whatever Justice gives uh man for fightin' for his rights. I know I ain't got a leg tuh stand on, nor anything tuh back up my story. The only regret I'll have is that four men still live—an' left tuh carry on where Wyatt an' Cash left off!"

Hamp Carter's old eyes had followed closely his every movement, every gesture. Almost unblinkingly he heard him out and if he was touched or swayed by Steve's passionate tirade, he betrayed no sign. He simply stared, his eyes shuttling two and fro, giving no hint of the workings of his own mind.

For a long time he said nothing after Steve had finished and slumped dejectedly down upon the crude cell bunk. Steve did not look at him, feeling certain that he had failed to ignite even a spark of sympathy in the impassive lawdog with his plea. He took his head in his hands and the more he contemplated the situation, the more preposterous he figured it must sound to a man like Carter who was in the position to know more than anyone else what went on in Cowskin.

THEN the lawman's voice was sheering through his dark thoughts. "Steve," Carter said, "there's no fool like an old fool, I reckon. Yore yarn has all the earmarks of a bunkhouse windie. But yuh hit a sore spot in my hide with it. To

be plumb frank, I never did like the suave cunnin' uh Burt Wyatt an' the killer instinct uh Deke Gorman. There's somethin' about Bood Blanchard that has allus made me distrust him like I would a pet wolf. Cash Trotter used tuh be looked up tuh as a honest citizen. But uh late he's been penny-pinchin' like some cantankerous miser. There's plenty I don't like about Basalt Baker. Somehow, that jigger's got the owlhoot stamped like a fresh brand on his hide. He don't savvy a hell of a lot about minin', either. But that's neither here nor there.

"He ain't done nothin' out uh the way, so I pussonally ain't got no kick agin him from uh lawdog's point uh view. Nonetheless, I don't like his style. Parson Holcomb is the only one uh the bunch yuh named that I jes' can't figger in as havin' tuh do with the Disciples. He's so pious an' sanctimonious. I've knowed him for a long time, Steve, an' he's allus been inclined tuh religion, so when Wyatt came an' offered tuh build him a church which Cowskin shore as hell needed, waal, Holcomb jes' quit ranchin' an' went tuh preachin'. Of course, I warn't blind tuh the reason for Wyatt's generosity. It was the ol' razzle-dazzle with the bait set out for Terry.

"How-the-so-ever, fer the sake uh argument, I mind once when I was a lad about knee-high. I seed a snake that was striped mighty purty. It didn't look like it would hurt a fly. But that dang bellywinder plumb fooled me. Bit me an' I durn near died. Purty as yuh please, son, but p'izonous tuh the gizzard. Mebbeso that's the way with the parson. Puttin' on so tuh cover a black heart. Who'd uh thunk that purtty snake was p'izon? Nobody that didn't know.

"As fer this Arch Prader pusson yuh speak of, son," and he scratched his bristly old head thoughtfully, "that's a sticker. I know everybody in an' around Cowskin, but I never heard uh anybody name uh Arch Prader. That's one thing that makes yore yarn sound plenty fishy. But tell yuh what I'll do. Supposin' yuh work yore brains out from in yore cell an' I'll work on the outside. If yuh can think up some way uh trappin' them fellers inta showin' their hands, I'll bring the evidence inta court an' testify myself fer yuh. That way I won't be losin' yuh nor makin' a too big fool outa myself. What do yuh say?"

New hope blazed within Steve. He leaped from the bunk, clutched at the bars of the cell portal. "I'm yo're huckleberry, Hamp," he said fervently. "I'll play the game tuh the last chip. Got those papers I took from Cash?"

Carter nodded, reached inside his shirt and withdrew the documents. "Yeah," he said. "I got tuh use 'em fer evidence."

"Let me have 'em uh minute," said Steve grimly.

The sheriff smiled shrewdly. "Nothin' doin', kid," he said. "Yo're tuh work yore brains agin the remainin' members uh the Devil's Disciples. Yuh cain't outguess me by destroyin' this evidence agin yuh. I warn't born yesterday. You jes' use yore haid an' tell me what the ol' think-tank puts on yore tongue."

Steve had to grin at the lawman's suspicion. Carter was plenty skeptical and was taking no chances on being duped.

"Have it yore own way, Hamp," Steve shrugged. "But looky. Jes' take a tiny little tear off'n the corners uh them papers. Then see that they get into the hands uh Bood Blanchard. In a day or so get 'em back an' be sure they're the ones yuh jingle-bob. You've read 'em, seen that they lack certain signatures tuh make 'em legal an' valid. There's a note among 'em fer eight thousand dollars against my father with the Spur Rowel as collateral. It ain't signed by dad, but it's what Cash was holdin' agin me for payment uh the loan. Pretend yuh don't know what they are when yuh give 'em tuh Blanchard. If he gets suspicious, it'll be all off. Yuh might say Cash asked yuh tuh give 'em to him jes' afore he died. Play the game with me, sheriff, an' they'll tip their hands. If yuh don't get them papers back signed by uh dead man, I'll lick yore boots, spurs an' all!"

Carter thought a moment, then his watery old eyes lighted with a slow fire. "All right," he said finally. "I'll play the game—yore way, Steve. I played Injun so good once that my pappy filled my britches full uh buckshot. Mebbeso this is it. I dunno. But ef what yuh say about Inky Hawkins is true, we'll bag ourselves a couple uh skunks at least." He strode away, smiling genuinely for the first time since the Devil's

Disciples had spread their reign of terror over the Pecos Valley. Steve watched him stride up to Buck Bristol and issue an order. "The prisoner's yores, Buck," he continued. "Watch him close. Steve Hale's plenty sharp when he's braced, cute as a sidewinder."

BRISTOL sauntered up, his carbine cradled in the crook of his left arm. He settled in a chair across the narrow corridor. Steve watched Carter out of sight, then looked down at the little triangles he had torn from the documents and left lying on the floor. He stooped down, reached through the bars and picked them up. Bristol watched him narrowly, but made no comment. With something of a prayer on his lips, Steve retreated to his bunk, shoving the fragments absently into his pocket.

The day wore on and the heat in the little jail became oppressive as the sun crawled like a ball of molten brass to the zenith, and slanted down toward the western scarps of the Organs. Steve lay on his bunk most of the time, resting and sleeping troublously. It was not until toward evening that a meal was brought to him. He ate in silence, his guards loitering just outside the cell, rifles ready. It amused him that they considered him so dangerous.

But he saw no amusement in the statement from Buck Bristol when his tray was removed. "I'm kinda worried, Hale," the deputy grunted. "Cowskin's like a nest uh hornets all stirred up an' ready tuh sting. She's gonna be some night. This town's plumb fergot it's church doin's it 'pears. Yo're the topic uh conversation everywhere. I'm afraid they're fixin' tuh take yuh out uh here tonight an' string yuh up."

"If they do," Steve gritted, "we'll have Bood Blanchard an' Basalt Baker tuh thank. They're doin' all the arousin', I reckon."

"They're doin' their share," Bristol said, and left.

Steve strode to the tiny barred window of his cell and looked out. The sun hung on the western ranges like a disk of coagulated blood. Fleecy white thunderheads rolled high over the Organ scarps, deckle-edged with crimson. Now he could see the lights of the town guttering on. And in the only part of the front street visible to him, men were knotted in a tight group. One of them stood upon a box and waved his arms like a cardboard silhouette on a string.

While he could not hear what the orator said, it was easy for Steve to surmise. The fellow was gesturing wildly and it was obvious that he was inciting the crowd to rally together and take the Gunhawk out of jail for an air jig. And there could be no mistake that the words of the orator were sinking deep into the minds of the listeners, for frequently their yells beat up, came to him dully on the cool air of the evening.

He watched them for a while, then returned to his bunk to think. During the day he had smoked up the last of his makin's, and when he asked Bristol for a whack at his tobacco and papers, the deputy nervously obliged. "What's happened tuh Hamp?" Steve inquired casually. "He ain't been around."

"Dunno," shrugged Buck. "Probably scoutin' around town. Wish he'd come. I don't like the looks uh that mob gatherin' out there. Yo're in a tough spot, ol' son, an' I wouldn't give a nickel for yore life."

"Not figgerin' on cheapin' out if trouble busts, are yuh?" Steve grunted sarcastically, seeing that the other's nerve was cracking.

"I ain't sayin' what we'll do when that mob starts bustin' down the jail tuh git yuh," retorted Bristol. "Yo're all spraddled out tuh hang anyway. No use in uh gent riskin' his neck tuh save yuh fer a regular execution."

"Pleasant gent, ain't yuh?" Steve clipped, and walked back to his bunk.

He judged it was close to nine o'clock when Carter finally appeared. The oldster was morose and haggard and it was plain to Steve that he too was worried. He came wearily to the cell, gripped the bars with his gnarled fists.

"I did like yuh asked me, son," the lawman said quietly. "Bood Blanchard nearly busted a cinch grabbin' them papers offen me. The way he did it makes me think somethin' is wrong there shore as hell. It was like his life depended on him gettin' 'em."

"Yeah?" Steve murmured eagerly. "What did yuh tell him?"

"I told him I had enough evidence agin yuh tuh spring any gallows trap," Carter replied, "without needin' them papers. But I don't reckon yore plan

is gonna work out, Steve. There won't be time. The whole town's gone loony for yore scalp. Seems Basalt Baker an' Blanchard have got 'em worked to uh pitch where it'll be tough chores handlin' 'em in the crisis. I'll do my best tuh stand 'em off. But I ain't guaranteein' yuh nothin'." He chewed fiercely on his mustache for an instant and continued. "Iffen they git me, yo're done. But they'll have tuh kill me first."

"Don't lose yore life over me, Hamp," said Steve fervently. "Jes' give me back my guns an' turn me loose."

CARTER'S brows lowered and he shook his head. "I'd be violatin' my oath uh office, Steve," he muttered sadly. "I cain't do that. I gotta keep yuh here for trial an' defend yuh ontil it comes up. We'll play it scary, son—straight, which is the only way I know how to play anything. I been a lawdog in the Pecos for nigh onta thirty years an' yuh cain't teach uh ol' pooch new tricks. We'll stand by the code I swore to. But iffen worst comes tuh worst, I'll slip yuh yore hardware an' let yuh go out fightin' like a man."

"Mean yuh won't even open the cell door?" Steve asked softly.

"Nope," said Carter. "I can't. The law's the law, son."

Steve nodded darkly. "Okay, then," he murmured. "See yuh in hell, Hamp."

"Yuh shore will iffen they git that close to yuh," said Hamp. "Waal, deep graves an' white-washed headboards, son."

"Banked fires an' slow drawin' for lynchers!" gave back Steve, as Carter moved away toward his front office.

A silence that was ominous, wicked, built up. Outside not a sound floated in. Buck Bristol was pacing the corridor now, showing the strain of uncertainty. His tanned face was pale and his eyes shifted about him as if expecting the back door to bust open suddenly and be jammed with howling, lynch-mad townspeople. Harv Temple, the other deputy, leaned stolidly against the wall opposite Steve's cell. His face was set hard and his handle-bar moustache flowing down his lean jaws like the rope fenders of a tugboat, seemed to bristle. His eyes were puckered, but unlike Bristol, he was unafraid of what might come.

Steve liked him, knew he could bank on him in the crisis he felt was not far off now. He waited, his body growing more and more taut under the strain of each passing moment. It was nerve wracking to know that outside men plotted his death and that he was helpless to do anything about it. He saw the irony of it all clearly. The very men who were being incited to fury against him were men he had bent every effort to protect from the violence of the unholy legion. It was galling, that. But he knew it had always been that way since the crucifixion, would probably always be a failing trait of the human race to hurt the hand that offered them salvation.

His mind reflected back to his early boyhood when his father had read the Bible to him and Johnny, and had tried to explain its passages. But he had never been able to understand the greed, lust and violence of the masses. He had wondered and puzzled over the reason for nailing the Man to the cross. Now it seemed that the story was being reenacted in Cowskin, on a smaller scale. It had been the way of the world since the beginning of time. The many listened to the cunning tongues of the few diabolical schemers.

And now he could hear the ugly undertone of their voices, the urging of Bood Blanchard and Basalt Baker. And the drone built up ominously, swiftly, until the blood-mad men in front of the jail were yelling with the cries of Cain.

He listened, the hair on the back of his neck standing on end. Then his heart leaped into his throat as Bristol and Temple suddenly left their posts and ran forward at the abrupt cry of Hamp Carter: "Here they come, fellas! Stand 'em off!"

A Negro prisoner in one of the other cells knelt down and prayed loudly, wildly. Steve looked at him with sympathy. The poor fellow was frightened out of his wits despite the fact that the crowd did not want him. Although Steve realized there was a chance that the mob crazed for want of blood, might also take him out and make it a double hanging. The ebon prisoner must have thought of that too, for his dark skin was pasty in the feeble light of a suspension lamp that hung over the center of the corridor.

Then Carter burst up to Steve, car-

rying his guns. Grimly he thrust the weapons and belts through the bars and Steve was quick to see that every loop contained a shining cartridge. He looked at the lawman with gratitude.

"Good luck, son," murmured Carter. "Take some uh them lynchers inta hell with yuh. It'll teach 'em a lesson!"

"I'll jam that corridor with dead men, sheriff!" Steve gritted, and the lawman was gone.

Steve hurriedly belted on his guns. The rising clamor of the mob beat upon him as he snapped out the pistols and spun the cylinders. The very feel of them in his hands gave him an assurance until now lacking. If he must die, he would concentrate upon taking the mob leaders with him—Bood Blanchard and Basalt Baker. He would kill them as he went down.

SUDDENLY he heard Carter's voice quieting the clamor out in front of the jailhouse. "Wait!" the lawman yelled. "Stop where yuh are—all uh yuh. Try tuh reason this thing out an' see what yo're doin'. Lay uh hand on my prisoner an' yuh'll regret it the rest uh yore natural lives. You'll do somethin' yuh won't ever be able tuh live down iffen he turns out tuh be innocent!"

Bood Blanchard's voice sheered through the babble that followed. "He ain't innocent, an' there ain't no stoppin' us, sheriff. Stand back iffen yuh don't want tuh git hurt. We ain't takin' no chances on some shyster lawyer sidin' Hale an' gittin' him off loose. Are we, boys?"

"Not by a damn sight!" echoed Basalt Baker. "Let's string him up now! We're wastin' time listenin' tuh somebody's jaw-wash!"

Shouts of approval beat up. Carter called for silence and got it.

"Don't listen tuh what Bood or Basalt say, men," he bellowed stridently. "No one'll try this case but Judge Brockman an' yuh all know him fer tuh be a honest man. Don't let misjudgment an' the words uh someone else make yuh do this. Think for yoreselves. There's only one step lower'n a snake an' that's stringing a man up without givin' him a fair trial. Mob law ain't ever given out justice an' the only way fer yuh tuh git Steve Hale is fer yuh tuh take him over my dead body. That's clear, ain't it?"

A brief silence prevailed following Carter's challenge. During that moment Steve became aware of the stealthy opening of the rear door of the jailhouse. The going of the guards to the front had left that door unguarded. Steve's blood curdled as it opened, so sure was he that some of the mobsters had stolen around to the rear and now were sneaking upon him.

His guns levelled on the door and then through slitted eyes he saw the frightened, anxious face of Terry Holcomb as she peered into the corridor. His guns quivered down and goose-pimples stood out on his bare arms at the thought of how close he had come to killing her. Then she was rushing toward him, sobbing. Quickly her arms were through the bars and holding him tightly.

"Oh, Stephen," she cried softly. "They're going to lynch you. Blanchard and Baker have worked the town into a frenzy. They'll kill even old Hamp to get you. I'm afraid."

He gripped her arm desperately. "I've got my guns," he ground out, "but Carter won't let me out of this cell. Thinks he can stand 'em off himself. Like bein' trapped in a well. But all I ask for now is that Blanchard an' Baker come under my guns. If they do—they'll go tuh hell before I do!"

"You won't have a chance if they find you here," she cried, her voice almost drowned out by the sudden yells of the mob beating up at something Blanchard had said. She glanced avidly toward Carter's office. Her eyes lit on a bunch of keys that, in the excitement, the sheriff had left lying on the desk. Before Steve could stop her she was running toward them. He saw her snatch them up and run back like a deer. In a second she was trying key after key in the cell door.

Steve clutched the bars tensely, waited. Sobs shook Terry's body, made her hands tremble as she sought the right key. Then suddenly the lock clicked, rasped open as the bolt shot back. She gave a glad little cry and he burst free, sweeping her into his arms. He kissed her passionately and she thrust him from her.

"Run, Stephen," she pleaded. "Go while you can. They must not find you here."

"I'll be around close," he told her grimly, "watchin' over yuh, honey."

They ran swiftly to the rear door. As they reached it a shot echoed from the street and was answered by the guns of Hamp Carter. They whirled just as the lawman went down before a wild rush of the lynchers. The mob swarmed into the jail, yelling, shooting. Bristol had long since thrown down his guns. But Temple fought gamely, Steve saw in a swift glance. Then the deputy was borne down under the weight of sheer numbers and the rush into the jail was made in earnest.

Grabbing Terry by the arm, Steve plunged outside, thankful that the night was dark. His soul sang with the joy of having his life saved by Terry, but there was sadness in his heart for Hamp Carter. Yet there was nothing he could do now but flee. And he made good use now of his liberty.

CHAPTER XV

MAN-TRAP

STEVE HALE and Terry Holcomb hadn't a minute to spare before the howling mob burst through the sheriff's office and headed frenziedly for his empty cell. Once in the gloom of the alley in the rear, he planted a quick kiss upon Terry's inviting red lips. Then with her going swiftly in one direction and he the other, he melted into the gloom. The clamor of the mob beat upon him as he coyoted down the alley, hugging the shadows. He wondered if Carter had been killed in that mad Cain rush.

Now the tumult was becoming louder as the mob found his cell empty and charged out back through the rear door to look for him. Grinning mirthlessly he ran toward the very center of town. He knew that by staying within the center of the storm the chances for eluding them were greater. The crowd would hastily form a posse and thinking he had fled the town, would take out after him trusting to luck they would cut his trail somewhere on the outskirts.

So with the clamor building up behind him he made it to Bood Blanchard's office. Time was getting perilously short now. He couldn't hope to elude Cowskin forever and his chores had to be finished before they caught him and strung him up. There was the matter of the Spur Rowel papers to be cleared up. Steve had a feeling that Bood hadn't wasted time in having his pen expert work them over. And he figured he would be perfectly safe in Blanchard's office until the hue and cry for him simmered down. They would not think of looking for him there.

He hugged the wall at the side of the cattle dealer's office and looked out over the street. Already torches were flaring up. Posses would be searching for him quickly now. None but the renegades he sought would be likely to visit Blanchard's office. And if he were to die, he reflected grimly, it was far better facing the men he'd sworn to kill through gunsmoke than to have some posse of citizens shoot him down. He knew he would be shot on sight now, realized that the hours left to him to finish his tasks were numbered.

Driven by the rapid running of boots and the beat of hoofs as the men formed into posses, he eased up the side window and spraddled through, closing it again after him. Then like a bull in a china shop he began his search for the papers with the torn edges. Drawer after drawer of Bood's desk, he dumped on the floor and rifled. The search was maddeningly slow and each sound jerked him erect, clawing for his guns.

Each piece of paper that came to his hand must be explored there in the dark for torn corners. And he must search each of the four corners. That was what required time, much more than he could afford to spare with his life hanging on the tick of a clock. Not knowing the lay-out of the office contributed to time. It was difficult for him to determine just where Blanchard would hide the papers. There was only one thing open to him—search the entire office. He settled down to the task with grim doggedness. And in the dark. He dare not light a match in fear of attracting attention to the place.

Outside the clamor still beat up. He heard horses thunder down the street, men yelling. Then suddenly through the tumult his attention was drawn to the window through which he had crawled. It sounded first like the flutter

of a bird's wing beating the glass. Then built up to a staccato rap.

Steve stiffened, poised on the balls of his feet. His guns leaped into his hands. The window started up. He heard its low rasps. He crouched down beside the desk, watching. Then he saw a cone-peaked sombrero outlined in the window. The tautness left him as Chico Megares' whispered voice floated in to him.

"Steve! Senor Steve! Eet ees me, Chico—comeeng een. Do not shoot, amigo mio!"

In a moment the little border bandit was in the room, his teeth glistening like polished ivory in the moonglow splashing through the window.

"What are yuh doin' here, Chico?" Steve demanded softly. "How'd yuh know I was here?"

Chico laughed with the sound of a running stream. "I am watching near the jail house when I see you ron from thee back," Chico purred back. "Mee ver' smart, Senor. I say to myself I betcha Steve ron lak' hell to where thees hombres weel not look for heem. That ees een Bood Blanchard's place. So I come queekly, my fran. Valgame! Thees whole town she beating the bush for you. Like lookeeng for the peens een the oat been, huh so?"

Steve's brows lowered darkly. "Now looky here, Chico Megares," he bit out sharply. "You're either with me or yuh ain't. I'm gettin' tired uh yuh runnin' out on me every time I'm countin' on yuh big. What the hell happened to yuh at Wyatt's barn? Carter was there waitin' for me when I got back. If yuh'd played ball with me, yuh could've tipped me off tuh him bein' there an' this—this lynchin' party never'd happened."

A hurt look settled over Chico's eyes. He spoke in a husky voice now. "You see, Senor Steve," he said. "I am only tryeeng to help you. Seence your padre ees dead an' he was my ver' dear fran, I am takeeng hees place to watch over you. Like your padre, I know you are a ver' brave man. Too brave, *muchado,* for your own good. Alone you have no chance to beat thees Disciples an' thee whole town toget'er. So I deed what your padre would have me do. I go tell thees sheriffs where to find yuh an' heem come. Eet ees well. There ees a time en every hombre's life when heem need the law on heem side. Alone you ces fried beef, Senor. I bank ver' heavy on you telling thees lawdog thee whole story. Hamps, heem ver' smart too. Heem help you, huh so?"

STEVE stared at him grimly. "Well I'll be a—," he muttered wonderingly. "You ought tuh have yore ears pinned back, my peacock. Thought yuh'd have me pinched so I could tell the sheriff my side uh the story, huh? You shore don't mind gamblin' with my neck, do you?"

Chico laughed. "Poof!" he gestured. "Gamble weeth your life? I am watcheeng over eet, Senor. Chico Megares is your fran. I am only anxious to save you from thees hombres what call themselves El Diablo's Disciples!"

"Why yuh so anxious to save my skin?" Steve clipped. "I don't owe you anything, or you me."

"No?" Chico chuckled. "The Spur Rowel she owes me wan hundred head of thee cattle. Eef you are dead, how weel I collect these beefs?"

Steve was forced to laugh softly with Chico on that one. It was just the little Mexican's modest way of covering up the real reasons for his aid. Yet Steve knew there was some hidden motive behind Chico's presence in Cowskin. He was not merely repaying a debt to the Hales by helping him.

Little Chico Megares had repaid that old debt many times over. There was some other cause for his hate directed at the renegades who deviled the Pecos. And Steve sensed it was not altogether for the merciless killing of old Bronco and Johnny. He felt there was something personal in his efforts to defeat the Disciples. Some good reason for his placing every mental and physical possession into the life and death struggle of the Pecos against the ruthless tyranny of the unholy legion.

But there was no time to go into that now. The papers had to be found, battles had to be waged. Steve's voice was sharp and crisp as he spoke. "Pull out every drawer in the joint," he ordered Chico. "Look for some papers with the corners torn off. If yuh find 'em, sing out."

They went to work. Silence came between them. Silence shattered only by their movements as the search went on. By now they had turned the office inside

out. Steve grew desperate as he continued failing to find what he sought. Chico likewise was growing impatient. But they searched on diligently, fruitlessly.

Then suddenly a sound at the front door was shooting cold chills up their spines, sending their hands darting toward their gun-heels.

"Get behind somethin'!" Steve rapped out from between clenched teeth. "Duck, Chico!"

Chico's movements stopped and then the little bandit melted into the gloom. Steve flattened himself against the wall of a partition, his guns in his hands, hammers eared back. In the splash of light made by the opening of the front door, he recognized the thick shoulders of Bood Blanchard.

And he saw that the cattle dealer was alone! Breathless, he waited. Bood stumbled forward in the darkness, banged his shins against something, and cursed roundly. Then he was scratching a match along his pants leg. The office guttered with light as he touched the wick of an oil lamp.

Blanchard's beady eyes took in the wild disorder of the room with no betrayal of surprise. Then he whirled around and glared into the muzzles of Steve's guns without the slightest flicker of emotion crossing his set features. A brutal, ugly grin parted his cruel lips.

"I shoulda been a tinhorn gambler with my instinct, Hale" he ground out viciously. "Yuh done exactly what I figgered yuh'd do."

Steve rose, shocked. "So what?" he clipped, crouching a bit.

Blanchard tilted back his head. A gale of derisive laughter swelled from his throat. "Yo're goose is plumb cooked brown this time, Mister Gunhawk!" he roared. "I'm gunna eat yuh up—pinfeathers 'n all!" Then his voice rose piercingly. "He's here, fellers, all spraddled out fer killin' neat as yuh please. Jes' keep yore gut-shooters lined on his brisket ontil I git through tellin' it tuh him scary!"

Icy shivers shot up Steve's spine. He realized instantly that Blanchard had cunningly anticipated this move and now had the office surrounded with hard-eyed gunnies who would kill him at the flick of the renegade's eyelashes. Over everyone's judgment, Bood had not joined the chase out of town, but had brought his hired gun-slammers here. Steve wondered how many had him covered. He glanced desperately around the room. Every window had a man framed in its portal, guns trained upon him.

"Easy with them hawg-laigs, fella," Blanchard warned him as if cautioning a waitress that she was putting too much cream and sugar in his java. "Jes' outside the windows stands Inky Hawkins, slickest penman in Taixas an' as fast on the belly-shoot as any gent that ever walked. Gut-shootin' yuh'd be like eatin' fried chicken tuh Inky. An' drillin' yuh right where yore suspenders cross is a feller that's got fourteen notches on his gun-heel—the Big Bend Kid. He kin knock a peso outa the air. At the other window an' jes' spraddlin' through is Bull Frayne, the feller yuh bent yore iron over in the bank. Bull's got yore ticket tuh hell in his gun, fella, an' is jes' yearnin' tuh punch it out. Yes siree, I shoulda been a gambler with my hunches, an' I got a hunch right now yuh better git them paws away from yore cutters or enough lead tuh sink yuh tuh China will be slammin' yore way plumb pronto!"

STEVE HALE knew he hadn't a chance now. His eyes swept the windows again, desperately. He saw Frayne angling toward him, his eyes a-glitter with hatred and fury. Here was a man who could, like Blanchard, kill with his bare hands if he chose. There was the strength of a gorilla in their builds, in the cut of their broad shoulders. Bull looked mighty, cadaverous, ominous, in the guttering light as he hackled up.

He was one of the death-dealing jaws in this mantrap into which Steve Hale had walked. And all that was required to spring it upon him was a word from Blanchard who had cunningly outguessed him. Yet Steve realized suddenly that he had an ace in the hole in this deadly game of death. Blanchard nor any of the others seemed aware of Chico Megares' presence in that room. And Steve himself wondered where the little Mexican was now. He couldn't see him anywhere, judged he had slipped noiselessly behind some object that hid him from the rest of the room.

But ace or no ace, it was a mighty dangerous spot for Steve, he knew. Yet not quite as bad as it might have ap-

peared on the surface. Dame Fortune seemed to have smiled upon him in other close corners. She was smiling again in that Chico could easily turn the tables on this band of cutthroats if he thought swiftly enough. And the little border bandido had a capacity for quick thought—quicker shooting.

Blanchard spoke again in a sullen tone. "Been here lookin' fer some papers, ain't yuh, Hale?" he gruffed. "Them same papers o' Hamp turned over tuh me as bein' wuthless, I bet uh peso. Pore ol' Hamp's gittin' in his second childhood thinkin' them papers ain't no good. Shucks, it's like takin' candy from uh baby. When he turned them papers over tuh me, he gave us control uh the Spur Rowel. An' there was a lien agin the Seven Bar Seven mixed in with 'em! Now we jes' about control the whole uh the Pecos, fella, an' we start pronto drivin' out the little fellers. Why, yuh cross-bred son of a polecat, both uh yuh played right inta my hands. Hell! Takin' over now'll be like shootin' coyotes in a barrel with a scattergun. Cain't miss!"

Steve looked at him calmly and there was a deadly glitter in his pinched eyes. His hand stole unobtrusively to his shirt pocket. He did it casually and slowly lest he excite the trigger fingers of Bull Frayne and the others. He fished for the empty cartridge he knew was there. A spent shell bearing the name of Blanchard. Grimly he handed it to the renegade. Bood accepted it with puzzlement, rolled it over and over between his fingers, then looked back curiously.

"Got my name on it," he growled. "What the hell?"

"It come from the ol' Bisley Colt's dad, an' Johnny left for me in a hollow tree, Blanchard," said Steve softly. "It was picked up on the scene uh one uh yore crimes after yuh'd ejected it from yore gun. Johnny got it an' scratched yore name on it. That's *yore* ticket tuh hell, Bood, an' she ain't round-trip!"

Blanchard glowered. "Pretty cute, I'd say," he smirked. "He musta got it at the Flyin' W when we was out serenadin' Wally Wooten with six-gun music, as a feller says. He got ringy an' it called fer lead-shuckin' so I let him have a chunk out uh my cutter. Yep, pretty cute uh yore kid brother—matchin' us up with our empties. But smart hombres git buried fast around Cowskin. Yo're too long overdue yoreself, fella. Yuh been cheatin' boothill too long. I'da got yuh the evenin' yuh came back tuh this country iffen it hadn't been fer pore light. An' yuh'd been cold fruit on a cottonwood right now iffen that damn Mex friend uh yores hadn't showed up at our necktie party. But a feller cain't allus play in luck. Wormy grave to yuh, kid!"

"My only regret," murmured Steve calmly, acidly, "is that yuh shot at me an' ran like a mangy coyote, Blanchard. If yuh'd stayed, yuh would uh been the first uh the Disciples tuh go."

Blanchard grinned viciously and it was obvious that he was toying with Steve like a cat playing with a mouse, trying to break him under the terrific strain of a man about to be killed.

"The Devil's Disciples," he mused. "That's what the sky-skipper dubbed us, an' a right appropriate handle she is, too. But I'll have tuh kill that pious he-coon one uh these days—him an' his whole damn tribe. The gal double crossed us in lettin' yuh git that Bisley, an' young Matt's been proddin' his Sharps in the wrong snake-holes. I never seed a more yalla he-coon than Holcomb. Never would shuck lead fer us an' is allus preachin' agin us. If I don't kill that galoot afore very long, the Big Auger will."

A thrill shot through Steve. By Bood's own admission, the parson had played no hand in the actual violence of the Devil's Disciples. He had never shucked a single slug at the unholy legion's victims. But it made no difference. He had ridden with the band and was therefore an accomplice, a cog in the machinery of their crimes. He was as guilty as the rest for aiding and abetting.

"An' this Big Auger," Steve clipped out. "If I'm tuh die, I'd like tuh go knowin' who he is, Blanchard. Mind tellin' uh gent?"

BLANCHARD laughed softly. "Shore not," he said. "Arch Prader—iffen yuh kin figger out who he is which ain't likely. He's covered up an' fer all yuh know he might be ol' Hamp Carter, or mebbe Bull Frayne!" He paused to let loose a gale of laughter. Then he was going on, drunk with the

power of holding a life in the hollow of his murderous hand. "So yuh was searchin' fer them papers an' didn't find 'em, huh? Hell, fella, they been worked over, signed an' delivered tuh the Big Auger. Yore Spur Rowel ain't no more. Combined with the others, she's part uh the Pecos Valley Land an' Cattle Syndicate uh which I am vice president an' general manager.

"Reckon we owe yuh a vote uh thanks, hombre, fer cuttin' down Wyatt an' Cash Trotter. It built the split fer the rest uh us. Save us the trouble uh knockin' 'em off later. An' I'm gunna pay yuh off by fryin' yuh in yore own dam grease. I could hand yuh over tuh the town an' let 'em stretch yore mangy neck on a cottonwood. But that wouldn't be satisfyin'. I want tuh get the kick uh plasterin' yore ears back with lead my ownself. Better start sayin' yore prayers, kid. Yuh ain't got long tuh live now."

Like a rasp running over hard steel, Bood's voice grated on Steve's frayed nerves. "Bet yuh couldn't play square with yore own mother, Blanchard," he ground out. "If yuh could only fight like yuh growl, what a hell on uh fence post yud'h be. But yo're yalla tuh the gizzard, Blanchard. You ain't got the guts of a wood-tick."

Blanchard's lips hardened. Then he laughed again. "Go ahead an' have yore fun," he said. "It's the last yuh'll ever have in this vale uh tears. I'm givin' yuh a break. The Big Auger'd mos' likely have strung yuh to uh star by now. I'm jes' gunna raise my hand like this, see? an' watch yuh git enough holes drilled through yuh so that iffen yuh took a drink uh whiskey yu'd leak like a sieve. Time's wastin', also. Iffen yuh got anything else tuh say, better say it pronto, fella. Yo're goin' out mighty damn fast now."

CHAPTER XVI

Three Down, Three to Go

STEVE HALE saw the killer flame in Bood Blanchard's small eyes as he raised his hand in signal to his gunslammers to be ready. The cattle dealer was poised now, his brutal face beaded with unnatural sweat. In this moment of nerve wracking tension, he reminded Steve of some grim executioner ready to swing the beheading axe or cut the cord of a guillotine. Bood's great muscles writhed and corded under his shirt as he lifted his arm higher. His lips were twisted in an unholy grin.

Desperately Steve's eyes shuttled about the room. Inky Hawkins hadn't moved. He just bulked there in the window, ominous, threatening, his guns raised, hammers eared back. The Big Bend Kid was leaning over the sill of his post, framed in the window like some nocturnal animal ready to spring. His eyes glittered with the chill of death. Bull Frayne was crouched now, his gun trained on Steve's brisket from a distance of less than ten feet. The lust to kill flared in his eyes, swelled his swine-like nostrils.

Then Steve's glance held on a slight movement at the corner of a partition. He alone saw the muzzle of a Colt's coming into view there. Chico Megares was at last making his play to save the life of his friend from the killers' man-trap. Steve held his breath and with the instinct born and bred in true rangemen, he contemplated the little Mexican's chances. Chico's only chance, he realized, was to shoot out the light. Even then it would be a nip and tuck battle with death for both of them, for with so many guns trained and ready, only lightning-like reflexes would save them from being cut down where they stood at the first break.

Somewhere in the room a water faucet was dripping rhythmically. So silent was the place now that the steady drip sounded like the tap of a blind man's cane on a pavement. And now as Bood's muscles tensed in reaction to the movement of bringing down his hand that would spell doom for Steve, the room exploded into darkness with the crash of Chico's guns.

Steve heard the solid *plunk* of lead striking flesh and bone as he leaped aside in the darkness. A prolonged death scream swelled from Bull Frayne's constricted throat. His bulk cutting a huge chunk out of the gloom, Steve saw him twist and jerk like a puppet on a cord. Then the gun-hung bully spun down with a crash that shook the building.

With a purely reflexed motion, Steve

had dodged aside and hunkered down against the partition behind which lurked Chico. Now his guns were bucking in his hands, acrid gunsmoke stinging his lungs. Pencils of orange and blue colored flame stabbed the room like streak lightning. Lead sang harmlessly over his head. Then he was moving from place to place so that the renegades would not be able to concentrate on his gunflashes.

He triggered viciously at Inky Hawkins in the window and tallied with his first shot. The gun-hung penslick pitched up his arms and fell backward out of sight. Then Chico got in a good shot at the Big Bend Kid, planted twin slugs squarely between his eyes. The desperado simply wilted over the window sill and lay there, his long arms sweeping the floor. He gave a low curse that died on his colorless lips in a deep gurgle.

Then silence again. It gripped the gun-shaken room like a smothering cloak. Steve's eyes roved everywhere. Somewhere in that room was Bood Blanchard and Chico Megares. He had to be careful lest he mistake the little Mexican for an enemy. A sudden commotion came to him from outside. Men were running toward Blanchard's, their boot heels pounding on the boardwalk lining the street. Steve realized that this fight had to end quickly. He did not care to be trapped here by men come to investigate the shooting.

He looked about desperately for Blanchard, saw a dark form blocking the gloom. But he wasn't sure it was the cattle dealer. He held his fire and then the scraping of a boot behind him made his skin creep. Then the room was jarred again as Chico triggered at a renegade who appeared suddenly in a window. The fellow's death scream tore through the silence like a knife.

"Muzzles for renegade dogs!" the little Mexican screeched gleefully. "Come get thee lead muzzles, sons of thee coyotes!"

Then a heavy body fell upon Steve from behind. He found himself in the vise-like grip of Bood Blanchard who could kill a man with his bare hands. It was too close for gun work now. Steve lashed out with balled fists, reveling in the grunt of pain from the cattle dealer. Kicking, smashing mighty blows, they fought. Chairs were flung aside as they battled back and forth across the small office. Then Steve landed a solid smash to Blanchard's face, sent him reeling backward over a table. The table crashed to splinters under his weight. He leaped up and Steve met him with battering rights and lefts. In a moment both were badly bruised, covered with blood and gore. But Steve was enjoying this fight. Their bodies came together with a crash. They fought for grips on each other's throat.

Suddenly by a quick jerk of his body, Bood had Steve in a bear-like hug, calculating to squeeze the very life from him.

"I'm gunna crush yuh like I would a snail under my boot heel, fella," the renegade swore, straining, tightening his arms like a python. "I been prayin' fer this chance tuh do yuh down with my bare hands. This is it, amigo."

STEVE'S lungs screamed for air as seconds wore on. His flaring nostrils drew in nothing but stinging gunsmoke that hung over the room in gray clouds. Blanchard had the strength of a bull and started bearing down upon him with all his might.

Steve Hale had brawled many a man in his wandering day. But few of them possessed the terrible, killing strength of this one. Bood Blanchard might have been a wrestler, for he seemed to know all the tricks of a merciless bone-busting trade. Steve felt his ribs crack as those powerful arms drew tighter, felt the air shoot from his lungs in a loud whistle.

Desperately he called upon the last ounce of his strength to break that strangling grip. He got his palm beneath Bood's jutting chin and shoved. The renegade's head went back. Those powerful arms loosened. Relentlessly Steve thrust his left arm behind Blanchard's back, then using it for a lever continued to thrust his great head down between his shoulder blades.

A wild pleasure flooded him as the outlaw groaned and grunted in pain. His rib-cracking hug eased, Steve gulped air frenziedly, fought on in the darkness. Then Bood was flailing at his face with wild, bludgeoning fists. But Steve held on, dropping his head down to shield his cheeks from those punishing blows.

His breath was coming in great gasps

now as he forced his enemy back. He felt the sting leave Blanchard's blows, felt him weakening as inch by inch he shoved his head down, pulled forward on the small of his back.

Then he discovered that they were fighting at a window and the moon was splashing its silvery glow over the renegade's twisted face. Like a whirlwind he slammed Bood backward over the sill, held down his beating legs with his own. As his spine contacted the edge of the sill, Blanchard gasped. Relentlessly Steve put forth more effort. Now he had both hands around the outlaw's throat, choking him, forcing him back through the window.

The strain upon Steve's muscles was almost unbearable. His breath was but a thin stream now. His brain swam with exertion. Yet he battled on, every fibre in his body screaming for him to kill this man. Then they were plunging through the window. Dazedly Steve was aware of a sodden crunching beneath him as they hit the ground.

A great sob swelled in Blanchard's throat. Steve struggled for a new hold. But it was not needed. Bood's body went suddenly limp under him. And in the moonglow Steve saw that his head was twisted grotesquely to one side, an awful lump swelling fast beneath his right ear.

He needed but one glance to tell him Blanchard was dead, his neck broken in the fall with his, Steve's, whole weight upon him. He straightened grimly. "That's irony for the book," he muttered to himself through bleeding lips. "Here's a feller dealin' in broken necks —dead with his own busted. Retribution always comes to a feller like him."

He got up as a crowd began gathering. They glared at him and then someone shouted: "It's The Gunhawk an' he jest kilt Boudinot Blanchard! Git him now!"

They charged him with a wild rush. Steve lashed out with his fists, sent the leaders sprawling and then dashed down the narrow alley between the two buildings. He looked for Chico as he ran and decided the little Mexican had long since taken flight, there being no need for him to stay. The mob fell in behind him, but he soon outdistanced them. They were afraid to get too close and none dared follow him when he ducked through somebody's back yard, ran across a tiny vegetable garden and headed toward the corral for Shasta.

Stumpy Joe was not at the corral when he arrived. The few horses there were unwatched. All Steve had to do was slam his saddle upon Shasta's back and ride out. He tore out of town and headed for the open. Half an hour later he was deep in the bosque of Spur Rowel Creek, bathing his battered face in the cool, gurgling water. Clotted blood stained the moon-silvered stream. And as he washed up, scrubbing his cuts and bruises gently, his soul sang with the music of victory.

"Three down, three tuh go!" he told himself, stripping his kak from Shasta and picketing him in the willows. "Three down an' three tuh go. Even fight now! They can't stop me! I got 'em licked an' mebbeso tomorrow will see the end uh the Devil's Disciples!"

He crawled into a thicket, spread out his saddle blanket. He was weary, bodily and mentally tired, bitter. Every muscle in his body seemed to rebel against the exertion of his battle with Blanchard. It felt good to lie down. For long minutes he lay there, head cradled on his saddle, watching the stars guttering in the cobalt dome above. Time was getting shorter now, he realized. Cowskin was prowling after his scalp. More than ever the town would demand his death. Basalt Baker and the Big Auger of the Disciples, Arch Prader, would probably increase the bounty.

EVERY man in Cowskin would be out to collect now. Bounty-money made weak men brave and the brave reckless, he knew. But after a good rest he felt he would be able to meet all obstacles as they came. There remained but three of the unholy legion to battle now. Basalt Baker, Arch Prader and—Parson Holcomb. Basalt Baker would be the next to go. And perhaps before sending him to hell with his boots on, he would tell who Arch Prader was. With that information tucked neatly under his belt, it would be but a matter of time before he, Steve, handed him his brass ticket to hell. A ticket that he would punch and then see what might be done about Holcomb.

He struggled to find a way of disposing of the renegade sky-skipper without

turning Terry so bitterly against him. But for the life of him he could see no other way than through gunsmoke. Whether he had ever fired a shot with the Disciples or not made no difference. Holcomb was as guilty as the others—had to feel the same justice as Wyatt, Trotter—Arch Prader. There could be no letting one live and killing the others. All were guilty—all had to die.

He was thinking of Terry when his lids became too heavy to keep open. Then he was asleep, sheer exhaustion overcoming him. Dreams came to him in a meaningless jumble. And when he finally awakened, the sun was lumbering toward the scarps of the Organs. He fixed the time as being past mid afternoon. Feeling rested and relaxed, he went to the creek, stripped and for fifteen minutes or so derived keen delight from whooshing the cool water over his body.

CHAPTER XVII

Gathering of the Devil's Clan

STEVE HALE realized as he whooshed the cold water over him that it was, after all, mighty good to be alive. He rubbed himself down briskly and contemplated life with a clear brain. It was mighty good just now. The empurpling Organs carried on through all as if nothing ever happened, looking down upon peace and violence with the same impassive quietness that awed him when he looked at them. Old Baldy Peak, attacked by the fury of the elements for eons and eons, seemed not to mind. It was all rather deep thinking for a cowpoke, but it gave Steve Hale strength to carry on.

Born and raised in this vast country, and drifting about it, he took keen delight in its rugged beauty. Took solace from these high scarps and wished fervently that at this moment he was riding through those serried canyons far up the slants of the mountains. It was peaceful up there, so near, yet so far away from this seemingly eternal man-made strife. He longed for the smell of pine and the thin, lung-tickling air of the higher reaches, yearned for their solitude and restfulness.

He recalled the many times he and Johnny had ridden up there in search of stray Spur Rowel cattle. There was a band of wild mustangs ranging up on the rock slants of Baldy Peak. And there had been old Indian camps where they had found arrowheads, stone axes and mortars and pestles. They had even found skulls with arrowheads imbedded in them. So the Organs must always have known strife from the beginning of time.

He wondered if there was any place in the whole universe where a man could go and find complete peace, protection from the trickery and conniving of men; escape from their diabolical schemes, greed, lust. He gave it up as useless. Human nature was human nature. What one man possessed, another wanted, killed, murdered to get it. He realized that he was fated to go on here in the Pecos. It was his home; he loved it, would not be forced out. There was one thing to look forward to. That was the final sweeping of the valley of the renegades who ravished it. He drew grim satisfaction that his chores were half done. Yet he was sure he faced the hardest task of all—the muzzling of Arch Prader and Basalt Baker. Holcomb, he felt, would be easy. There would be others to battle in the final showdown. Baker and Prader would unquestionably have themselves surrounded now with hired gunslammers. Possibly Holcomb himself had friends who would rally to his side at the finish. It was hard to judge a man like the sky-skipper, he bridled. Yet it would all come out in the wash.

Exposing Holcomb would be like stripping off his skin. Even if he turned Holcomb over to the proper authorities he knew he would lose Terry. He could lose no more if he killed him in a fair gunfight and by doing that he could return to the graves of his kin and lay bare his soul with a clear conscience.

He pondered on over the delicate situation until the first lances of night began foraying against the dying light of day. Grimly he realized that he was a creature of the night now. Perhaps soon he would be prowling the owlhoot, riding dim trails with the moon as his sun and the thin, quavering hoot of the owl upon his lips, the lingo of the renegade. He knew he dare not expose himself in the day-

light lest he become the target of some bounty hunter. The story was as old as man. People are prone to jump at conclusions, prone to leap at the chance of making money at the cost of someone else's blood. There was no beating human nature, he knew. The Cain-lust is born and bred in man.

As he dressed again he gave birth to an ugly premonition of disaster awaiting him in Cowskin. The feeling was so startling that it made him jerk erect and look about. A whispering voice from the willows seemed to say: "This is your last day, Steve Hale! Tomorrow you will be lying dead!"

And before he knew it he was answering, aloud: "All I ask is a chance to take three men with me. Only then can I die with a smile on my lips."

He smiled mockingly at his own words, wondered at their cause and laid it to jumpy nerves. The evening went on undisturbed. A bull bat darted from the willows and winged away, croaking. Down the creek he saw a fawn deer come to drink. It eyed him steadily for an instant, dipped its soft muzzle into the water and then darted away. He knew there was no one else in the vicinity, else the deer would not have ventured into the open.

He fought off his feelings of depression and sat down on a rock. From his saddlebags he took out a tin of sardines and a few crackers. Of this he made his meal, then topped it off with a quiet smoke. By now night had fallen about him like a sable cloak. He tossed the stump of his shuck into the creek, went to Shasta and was on his way toward Cowskin and—what? He had only his premonition to tell him. But there was no fear in his heart. Men don't fear death when it comes. It is the uncertainty that plays havoc with the senses.

IT was a taut, automaton of a man who left the creek bosque. Riding his saddle as if he were a part of it, Steve took out across the ranges, choosing to keep as far away from the highways as possible. Men might be lurking there to bushwhack him. It had been tried before. And now Cowskin had everything to win by killing him—yet everything to lose. By killing him they would further the deviltry of the Disciples, thereby destroying themselves. They would earn bounty money, yet lose their homes and their ranches. Poor fools, he thought—robbing Peter to pay Paul!

As he rode like a gray ghost through the trees behind the Holcomb home, a soft purring voice hailed him from the shadow pools. It was Chico Me[illegible]. The little border bandido appeared magic from the gloom, his wizened [illegible] cutting a grotesque block out of [illegible] darkness. His cone-peaked sombrero was perched far back on his small head and his vari-colored serape hung over his shoulders, pinned in the front, to protect him from the night chill.

His leathery face lit up in a wide smile. Steve curbed Shasta abruptly.

"I say to myself, Senor," the little Mexican slid up and held the palamino's bridle, "that Steve weel be comeeng along thees way to see the senorita so fair. Me theenk eef Chico wait here long enough, he weel see the Senor Steve pronto, huh so? I am waiteeng all the while under thee trees, my fran, weeth much bad news . . ."

"Bad news?" Steve leaned close to him. "Don't tell me, Chico. Jes' let me guess. I ain't had enough yet tuh sharpen my nose for trouble!"

"Valgame!" swore Chico luridly. "Thees *cabron* of a Basalt Baker heem round up every gunny heem could find to fight wan lone man—you, Senor. They have issued thee death sentence to the last of thee Hales. Even now they go to the church fandango at the Town Hall. Ten of them, Senor, an' I have ver' fond hopes thees Arch Prader weel be there."

"You an' me both, amigo mio," said Steve grimly. "I'll kill that skunk soon as somebody points him out to me."

"Ah, my fran," purred the Mexican, "but nobody weel do that onless it ees me—Chico Megares."

Steve stiffened. "You mean yuh've found him?"

"Not quite so, Senor," the border hellion replied. "Mebbeso yess, mebbeso no. I have found wan man I theenk ees thees Prader persons. But Senor, do not expect me to tell heem to you, for thees man ees my ver' own buzzard bait. I keel heem myself."

"Be a good sport, Chico . . ."

"Nodings doing, Senor," grinned Chico coldly, then changed the subject. "I have leestened een on some conversa-

tions. I hear many theengs of eentrest—"

Steve gripped him by the shoulder, sank his fingers deep. Chico winced. "Tell it fast an' scary, amigo," Steve gritted. "I'm wantin' tuh know it all."

"I hear thees Baker persons say that eef the Senor Steve do not die thees night,' purred Chico, "that he weel skeep out weeth the Senorita Holcomb. Heem say he keel that ol' goat of a sky-skipper to keep hees mouth shut. What you t'ink, huh what?"

Steve bit his lips. "I think the whole damn bunch uh them musta had their eyes on Terry," he ground out. "Poor kid! No wonder she was afraid tuh buck 'em! But Basalt Baker ain't going anywhere, Chico Megares, unless it's tuh boothill."

"That ees what I say to myself, Senor," Chico grinned, and his teeth gleamed like a gash of ivory in the starglow. "I weel see that heem gets a ver' nice headboard saying: Here lies Basalt Baker who made thee wan mistake of rubbing Senor Steve's hair thee wrong way, huh so?"

Steve grinned mirthlessly. "What else yuh got 'neath that cone-peaked sombrero?" he queried.

"Ver' much," replied the Mexican. "I have a present for you, Senor Steve—" he paused and reached inside his jacket, producing a little roll of documents "—thee papers you have searched for een Blanchard's office."

Steve jerked up in his saddle, surprised. "You mean yuh got my ranch papers?" he demanded.

"Here they are, my fran," Chico beamed pridefully.

STEVE took the extended documents and felt along the corners. There could be no mistake. They were torn. He could not help but strike a match and inspect them. He gasped. A new set of papers was with the old. The new had been made out in Arch Prader's name, giving him sole ownership of the Spur Rowel Ranch—and they were signed by Bronco Hale! Here at last was conclusive proof against the Disciples. What would Hamp Carter have to say now—when he proved those documents by fitting the torn corners now reposing in his pocket, in their proper places? What would he say when he discovered that Trotter's lien, then unsigned by Bronco Hale, was now signed —by a dead man? It dawned upon him suddenly that Blanchard was now dead, too. The evidence of forged papers could not touch him. But those made out in Prader's name—

He stuffed the papers inside his shirt, gazed down at the darkened silhouette of the little border bandido. "Chico," he said fervently, "yuh've helped me more than yuh'll ever know, more than I can ever repay. Without you I could never have won my ranch back, couldn't have lasted as long as I have. What I don't savvy is your deep interest in this. Why are you so anxious to have Prader for yore own personal gun tallow?"

Chico's little eyes slitted, gleamed in the star-fog. "Eet ees a ver' long, sad story, my fran," he said in a hate-filled voice that reminded Steve of the hiss of lightning. "I weel tell you. Eet happened wan long tam' ago, Senor, when I was but a lowly goat herder along the Rio Grande. A greengo dog came along wan day when I was not at home. My bride of seex short months was alone een my *jacal*. Thees greengo dog heem cotch her, Senor, an' een hees brutal way keeled her. My heart she go bust an' I am on thee trigger trail for the greengo whose name I learn later ees Arch Prader. I swear to thee Madre de Dios to keel all greengoes until I am sure of getteeng thees wan. So I have searched from Nacodoches to the Caleefornios an' from thee *Yellow*stone to thee Rio Grande. But always eet was the same—thees Arch Prader ees a leetle ahead of me. Wan tam' I hear hees voice. Always I have hear that voice een my ears, hees laugh that rings een my head, calling me on. But no longer I hunt, Senor. I hear that voice een Cowskin today—at the corral—"

"Stumpy Joe!" swore Steve. "I'd bet on it. But he's crazy, Chico. He hasn't got sense enough tuh get in outa the rain. He couldn't be Prader—leader uh the Devil's Disciples!'

"I deed not see thees man, Senor," said Chico. "I only heard heem laugh. He ees a killer, Senor, an' the man who owns that voice keeled my little chiquita mio, my beloved Dolores, an' no wan is goeeng to deny me thee pleasure of cotting out hees heart."

"Couldn't be Stumpy Joe," said

Steve thoughtfully. "Musta been someone else yuh heard, Chico. But he's got a voice that's hard tuh forget, because he's crazy, I reckon. Somebody gunwhupped him once an' made him thataway."

"No matter who he ees, Senor," swore Chico determinedly. "I weel cot out hees heart an' shove eet down hees throat when I find heem!"

Steve was silent for a moment. Whoever this man was that the little Mexican had finally tracked down, he certainly deserved whatever he would get. He patted the Mexican on the shoulder.

"Well, tonight will see the showdown between me an' the last uh the Disciples," he said grimly. "If yo're bound tuh stick around an' do some killin' uh yore own, yuh'll find me at the Town Hall case yuh need any help."

"We shall be ver' close toged'er, Senor Steve," Chico purred. "As wan fran to anodder—" and his little brown hand went up. Steve grasped it and the strength each put in that handclasp spoke more eloquently than words of a friendship that would never die.

Then as mysteriously as he had appeared, Chico Megares was gone into the shadows, slipping away like a fleet ghost. For a long moment Steve sat stiff in his kak, watching the spot where the darkness had swallowed him. Solemnly he shook his head after him. His heart bled for the sufferance the little Mexican had borne all these years. He wondered what fiendish streak had lit the devil's fires in the man who had inspired him with such a deadly hate. That man, he reflected, must be someone like this mysterious Arch Prader, drunk with might and power, lustful for blood and the itch to control everybody and everything.

WHO, he wondered, could this mysterious Arch Prader be? Stumpy Joe? Hardly. Stumpy didn't have brains enough. Yet—he had heard of cases where insane men thought they could rule the world. Still, Stumpy seemed harmless. Old Hamp Carter should know. And if Hamp believed the corralman harmless, it must be so, for men like Stumpy would be watched closely by a conscientious lawman of Carter's stamp, fearing the workings of an insane mind. But whoever Arch Prader might be, there was one thing inescapable to Steve. That man had to die—quick.

He rowelled Shasta on toward town, eager to get at the roots of the poisonous tree from which grew the boughs of the Devil's Disciples. That tree had to be hacked down, cut off at the roots if Cowskin and the whole Pecos was to be spared further sorrows, he reflected as he urged Shasta forward.

As he rode into town he saw Carter on the porch of the law office, his long, lean frame illuminated by a splash of yellow light coming through the open door. Keeping well out of the lawman's sight, Steve rode up behind the jail and slipped around to the front, his gun palmed. Just at the corner of the porch he halted, crouching just out of sight.

"Hamp Carter," he whispered in a voice that was scarcely audible beyond the grim-visaged lawdog. Carter whirled. "I got the papers back, sheriff," Steve went on softly. "Hawkins got in his work all right. If yuh want tuh look at 'em, jes' drop yore hardware on the porch an' come over slow like nothin' was happenin'. An' don't ferget, fella, that I know the difference between a dropped gun an' the stomp of a bootheel."

Carter snapped his cigarette stub into the street, unbuckled his gun-belt. He came forward toward Steve, chuckling. "Ain't takin' no chances, are yuh, button?" he spoke low and soft. "Cain't say as how I blame yuh much, what with the whole uh Cowskin jes' itchin' fer a shot at yore crownin' glory. How'm I tuh know them papers ain't phoney?"

"That's easy," grinned Steve. "I saved the corners yuh tore off' em in jail. They'll match up perfect."

"Gimme 'em an' I'll have a look-see inside where it's light," said Carter, and Steve handed papers and corners over to him.

"Now looky, Hamp," he said pleadingly. "I'm takin' uh long chance here an' I trust uh play the game square. Don't try anything."

"Trust me, son," said Carter fervently. "I'll be back in a jiffy." Then he was gone, his spurs clanking loudly on the planks of the porch. He didn't even pause to retrieve his gun. Steve watched him into the office, then hunkered down in the shadows to wait.

As he hunkered there he put his fin-

gers on the pulse of the town. Rigs and vehicles of all kind and sizes were arriving, loaded down with cowmen and their wives and children to attend the dance that marked the ending of the church social. Tie racks were becoming crowded with ponies. Cowprods in gaudy shirts and big hats strutted stiff-leggedly up and down the boardwalks. Cattlemen in their Sunday best stood in knots and talked of this and that. Men passed close to Steve, but he was well hidden in the shadows. The women and girls were gay in their bright ginghams and hoop skirts, hair knotted behind their heads and wide-brimmed straws perked jauntily on top. Spurs jangled musically to the tune of their laughter and a pang of remorse touched Steve.

How nice it would be, he thought, to take Terry to that dance social without a fear in the world. What wouldn't he give for a chance like this with her to be gay, light-hearted and free, to give himself over to the charms and the gaiety of the evening? His soul hungered for this human contact that was denied him now—perhaps forever. While Cowskin laughingly prepared to dance away its cares, he would be somewhere staking his very life against the last of the unholy legion. While they danced and laughed and let come what may, he would be shooting their troubles as well as his own.

And now a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder from behind. So engrossed in his meditations, he had heard no sound as the man came up. He whirled, guns palmed, ready to deal death. But Sheriff Carter's low voice quieted his fears.

"Jumpy nerves, ol' son," the lawdog chuckled, "makes fer pore gunswift. Take it easy. I want yuh should come around tuh the back. We kin talk there without yuh bein' seen."

STEVE nodded, chocked his guns back into their holsters and followed him to the rear of the jail-house. There the sheriff waxed eloquent in his tirade.

"I ain't never seen such a goll-durned fool fer takin' chances an' winnin' on uh hunch as yuh, Steve," he chuckled. "I figgered yuh was tellin' me a bunkhouse windie when yuh told me about the Disciples an' who yuh figgered they was. Now yuh bob up like a jack-in-the-box with proof uh the truth. I never did believe yuh. But I gotta now. Them papers warn't signed when I gave 'em tuh Blanchard. Now they got yore dad's hand on 'em neat as yuh please. I'd a swore in court it was ol' Bronco's hand-scrawlin' too. But dead men don't sign their monikers, button. Leastawise the ones I've seen couldn't. An' them torn corners dovetail puffect."

"You bet dead men don't sell away ranches or sign papers," Steve clipped tersely. "This case is in the feed bag fer yuh now, Hamp, an' I reckon I'm cleared. Yet the cleanin' uh Cowskin ain't done yet by a long shot. Basalt Baker an' the sky-skipper remain tuh be dealt with. An' there's that mysterious Arch Prader, last an' probably the worst uh the bunch. I'd give part uh my life tuh know who that jigger is."

Then he went on to tell of Chico's presence in the vicinity and of the reason for him being there on his trigger trail. Carter listened, shaking his head morosely. "I don't blame him for gunnin' after a gent that did that tuh his wife," he said finally. "Even a Mex has feelin's, son, an' Chico's a mighty human hombre in spite uh the big bounty on his head which, as fer as I'm concerned, ain't ever gunna be collected in the Pecos.

"But it's gallin' about Holcomb. He musta been outa his head tuh git tied up with that bunch uh killers. It galls me sore tuh think he'd let his gal git in too. Yuh say Chico told yuh Baker was gunna light with her iffen things got too hot fer him here?"

Steve's brows drew down. "Yeah," he ground out, "but he ain't goin' no futher'n Cowskin's boothill, sheriff. I'll belly-shoot him on sight."

"Go careful with that fella, son," cautioned Carter. "He's a killer—wuss'n Wyatt because yuh cain't ever read what he's thinkin' in his gapin' eyes. But he ain't gunna touch a hair on Terry's head whilst I'm livin'. Why son, I've knowed her since she was nothin' but a gawky leetle tike with yella hair an' goin' tuh school. An' I been doin' her paw a favor all on her account, because I didn't ever want tuh throw her out in the world with no one tuh watch out fer her. I'm lettin' yuh in on a leetle secret. I got uh ol' warrant in my office fer Holcomb. He used tuh be a renegade, Steve, an' kilt a deputy sheriff down in Marfa on the

Big Bend. It's one time in my life when I let my feelin's git away with me. An' I still hate myself for it, though I investigated him an' found he'd killed that lawdog in self defense. Anyway, I told him I'd let it go iffen he rode the right trails fer Terry an' young Matty's sake. So he took up religion an' till now I figgered him a top wrangler uh men's souls. This is what I got fer givin' him a break—fer Terry an' Matt."

His voice died out morosely, bitter with self recrimination. Steve grabbed his arm in a crushing grip. "I think I savvy it all now, lawdog," he said fervently. "That's what the Disciples hold over his head. He's afraid they'll let the cat out uh the bag an' have him pinched fer that killin'. That's the club over his head with which they forced him tuh be a member uh the bunch! They've made him play along on the threat uh bein' exposed, which would mean the good folks uh Cowskin'd run him out uh the church, mebbeso string him up fer hidin' behind the cloth. Blanchard himself told me he'd never lent a hand tuh the doin's uh the Disciples. That alone leaves a maverick in the brush somewhere, don't it?"

Carter nodded grimly. "I'm gonna have a good talk with that hombre," he said determinedly. "Mebbeso I'll take him up on that ol' warrant an' send him down tuh Marfa tuh face the music. They'll stretch his neck."

"Mebbe yuh can scare him out uh here afore I kill him," said Steve sullenly. "I don't want tuh ventilate that hombre account uh Terry, Hamp. But I'll shore as hell do it if he's still around when I finish up with the others!"

"We'll go palaver with him," said the lawman. "Wait'll I git my smoke-poles."

Steve's mind ran riot as he waited for the sheriff. A faint glimmer of hope that there might be some way of clearing Terry's father of this awful stigma attached to him, grew stronger. Perhaps Holcomb *was* simply a victim of circumstances and had sided the Disciples against his will. Perhaps not. Maybe the sky-skipper was still a renegade and his work in the church a blind. That thought deviled Steve and he told himself again Holcomb had to die.

CHAPTER XVIII

Holcomb Makes a Decision

IN a jiffy Sheriff Hamp Carter returned. Steve matched his strides toward the Holcomb home. They wasted no time and went on in silence. Their bootheels clomped dully as they went up the back steps of the parson's house. Lights burned brightly inside. Carter knocked on the door and Terry's voice came to them tremulously as she said: "Come in!"

Steve was at her side in a flash when he saw that she was crying over the supper dishes. He took her shoulders in his hands firmly, looked into her red-rimmed eyes.

"What's wrong, honey?" he inquired softly. "Yo're cryin'."

She bit her lip. "It's Dad," she sobbed. "He's upstairs cleaning and oiling his guns. He's going out tonight to kill Basalt Baker and Arch Prader!"

An exclamation of surprise burst from Carter's lips. "He's going to what?"

Terry hung her head. "He's heard that Baker has threatened to take me with him when he leaves Cowskin," she cried, "and now Dad's gone to get his guns. Oh, God, I know they'll kill him tonight!"

Steve put his arms about her, held her close to him to comfort her. Carter stepped from the kitchen into the dining room just as Holcomb came down the stairs. Steve saw him through the portal. Holcomb paused at the foot of the stairs, two tell-tale bulges at the thighs of his long box coat. His face was drawn in tight lines, set stonily.

Steve took Terry's arm and led her into the room. If their presence meant anything to Holcomb, he did not show it. His eyes had a strange fixity about them, betraying no emotion whatever. Steve though he looked like a man condemned to die and was willing—for a principle. Even Hamp Carter's voice failed to ignite the slightest spark of curiosity in the sky-skipper's eyes.

"What yuh gonna do, Parson?" Carter queried softly.

Holcomb stared back as if looking through a haze.

"Tonight is the night I deliver my final message to my flock," he intoned

heavily. "I must be on my way. They will be waitin' for me at the Town Hall."

Carter strode toward him, hands outstretched deprecatingly. "First time I've seen yuh totin' guns in a long spell, skipper," he said. "Yuh don't need 'em tuh preach uh sermon."

Holcomb's stare remained unchanged as he studied the sheriff. "It all depends on what kind of a sermon a man preaches, Carter," he said indifferently. "Some preach six-gun sermons, some with words. I'm goin' tuh do both this night, my good friend. These are tryin' times in the Pecos. Every man goes armed, even in church. This night I have a very special text to deliver. It will be called —when the cards uh violence are dealt in a game uh death, killers win only misery."

Terry gave a low sob, hid her face against Steve's chest. "That ain't gonna sound good to a gatherin' uh people that wants tuh dance an' be gay, Holcomb," he chided. "Let 'em be happy an' let me'n Hamp deliver that special text."

"There is no happiness in this world for me, Hale," the parson intoned, gazing at him with a far look in his eyes. "I thought there could be ontil they come tuh Cowskin an' crushed me under their thumbs. Now it is my turn tuh do some crushin'—"

"There'll be wolves at the dance that'll devil yuh," said Carter. "The clan uh the devil is gatherin' there tuh-night."

"You are a good man, Carter," said Holcomb. "I owe you a great deal. But there is no changing my mind. I must go now an' all that I ask is tuh go like the man I ain't ever been. See yuh at the Town Hall, gents."

Like an automaton he swung on his heels determinedly and walked swiftly from the room. His going was significant of the coldness with which he treated this night's work. Steve and Carter exchanged glances. The lawman shrugged. Terry was drying her tears now, her hands shaking.

"You better go along with him, Terry," Steve advised. "Stay with him every minute an' act as if nothin' was in the air. Hamp an' me'll be along later. We'll see what's tuh be done."

"You mean—" she looked up at him steadily, "that—that you won't kill him?"

"There must be some way out, honey," he said grimly. "I'll try my best tuh find what it is. Now yuh run along."

A look of gratitude suffused her eyes. And Steve read once more the love she held for him in their depth. A feeling of warmth and comfort stole over him and with it came again that ugly premonition he had felt there in the bosque of Spur Rowel Creek. He recognized its significance now. The last of the Disciples would be at the social with their hired gunslammers. Arrayed against the powerful combine would be but three men—himself, Hamp Carter and the parson. Pitiful odds against the pick of the Pecos renegades. But this was the showdown and Holcomb's words came to him abruptly: *The killers win misery!* An engulfing fear struck him. What if the sky-skipper's philosophy was wrong and the killers dealt misery instead of collecting it?

TERRY pressed his hand and brought him from his meditations. She stripped off her apron and stood before him in a bright gingham print that could not hide the charm of her shapely figure.

"There will be nothing I can do to stop him, Stephen," she said, taking up her box of social sweets to be auctioned off at the Town Hall to the highest bidder. "He's made his decision to kill Basalt Baker and Prader. Nothing we can do will swerve him."

And then she darted after her father, leaving them standing there, silent.

"So the worm is gunna turn, huh?" Carter grunted at length.

"He's goin' tuh sacrifice his life tuh save Terry from 'em," replied Steve, his jaw setting at a fighting angle. "Probably figgers it's the only decent thing for him tuh do. They'll kill him shore as hell!"

Carter's eyes shuttled on him narrowly. "How's fer yuh an' me sidin' him, son—fer Terry an' Matty?"

A grim smile played about Steve's lips. "Sidin' the gent that helped murder my father an' brother?" he gritted. "Dad an' Johnny'd turn over in their graves, Hamp. But let's go see the frolic an' mebbeso I won't have tuh kill the sly old hypocrite."

They matched strides outside and hurried up the street. And as they went a number of angles presented themselves

to Steve. Hamp could not try to arrest Baker on charges of being one of the Disciples without getting himself killed by the renegade's friends. Holcomb would be lucky if he lasted through the first blast of gunfire which would likely come the instant he talked out of turn. Steve decided it was best that he remain hidden, out of the scene as a sort of an ace in the hole to back Carter's plays. Perhaps he could get Baker alone. It would be certain death to go alone against the array of gunsters whom Chico had said were siding the Disciples. Conflicting emotions surged through him as he walked beside Carter toward the Town Hall. The thought that Holcomb was going to offer up his life to protect Terry thrilled him. Perhaps there was a streak of good in the renegade sky-pilot after all. And perhaps there was some truth in his being forced to side the Disciples to save his own neck in Cowskin.

But this was showdown time now. The payoff was not far away. Steve's lips set grimly with the knowledge that tonight would see the finish of the Devil's Disciples, or see him dead, one. Tonight, he knew, he would learn the real identity of Arch Prader, the trunk of that poisonous tree that little Chico Megares had pledged his life to axe down.

CHAPTER XIX

Gunsmoke Showdown

COWSKIN'S main street was choked with surries, wagons and buckboards. The creak of saddle and harness leather mixed with the laughter of the women and the low voices of men. Cowboys in gaudy shirts and oiled boots curbed at the tieracks and lit down, talking and laughing and hoorawing each other over the girls they hoped to get. Adding to this gay clamor, horses stomped, whinnied. Somewhere a dog was barking mournfully at the tawny moon that peeked over the eastern ranges. Steve Hale never had been superstitious. But he remembered that old Buck had howled like that just before his mother had died. It lent more significance to his premonition of disaster.

He wondered if this was his time to die. The stars looked down upon him in mocking answer to his thoughts. Then he saw Jake Fannin's big freight wagon pull up at the Town Hall. He must have moved his whole ranch into Cowskin, for the wagon was crowded. It vomited cowprods, girls, kids and the wives of his older hands. Their faces were flushed with the thrill of the occasion.

Then Steve left Hamp Carter and dodged between two buildings intending to come upon the Town Hall from the rear. He knew that his presence, if the town saw him, would only send his enemies snatching for their guns. It was better that he stay out of sight. He watched Carter walk into the center of the hilarity, saw him swallowed up in the crowd.

Fashioning himself a shuck, Steve remained in the deep gloom and explored the tie-racks from the distance. Old familiar brands were shown to him by the light splashing from the Town Hall's open windows and doors. He looked for Basalt Baker and saw him surrounded by a group of eight or ten gun-hung men. They were a tough bunch, he thought, border renegades whose activities seldom if ever saw the light of day.

He wondered if Chico had found the man he sought. His brows pinched down in a frown. If Arch Prader had surrounded himself with gun-slicks as Baker had done, then perhaps the little Mexican was dead now. He shuddered and then in a dark alley across the street he saw a small silhouette hunkered down at the corner of a building. A cone-peaked sombrero hung down his back, suspended from a buckskin thong around his throat. With a sigh of relief he recognized Chico Megares. The little Mexican was watching the Town Hall like a cat watching a mouse-hole and he caught the faint glint of the stars on the barrel of his rifle cradled in the crook of his arm.

Steve Hale felt mighty glad that the mysterious border bandido was not watching for him with the chill glow of death in his eyes. The pigeon-chested little outlaw carried swift or slow death under his vari-colored serape. And he was known to have killed men he hated by the slow process of skinning them alive. Now he was watching, listening for Arch Prader who had killed his bride of six months and put him on the owlhoot trail. Only a voice would identify his intended victim to him. Chico

Megares was ready, like a coiled rattler, to strike death at the heart of that unfortunate man.

There was no doubt in Steve's mind that the little bandido knew of his presence there. But he made no move to attract his attention. He finished his shuck, dropped it on the ground and heeled it out. Then he stalked down the narrow alley toward the rear of the hall from which the strains of old Grampy Parker's fiddlers were already lifting on the air.

The crowd in front of the hall filtered inside quickly and the dance floor was jammed when he surveyed the scene through a rear window. Children crowded the benches along the walls while their elders danced and bowed to one another. The scrape of boots and high-buttoned shoes on the sanded floor lifted above the music.

He saw that Baker and his gunnies hadn't entered the hall yet and he wondered what was keeping them. Had they reconsidered and had gone to some saloon, thinking he, Steve, would not have the nerve to show up here? He looked at Hamp Carter who was standing at the front door collecting guns as armed men entered. They laughingly handed them over and Carter in turn gave them to a deputy who reached inside a little anteroom to hang them up on pegs.

THAT made him feel better and conjured a plan in his mind. A grim smile split his lips as he walked around to a window of that little anteroom and let himself inside. Gunbelts and guns hung on the wall. Old Hamp was using his head this night, he thought, as he went to a small closet on one side. He squeezed inside to wait. It was uncomfortably warm there, but he didn't mind. Old Grampy's music kept him company and the sounds sheered in to him clearly, lively with the tune of "Buffalo Boy." It infected him with a desire to shake a mean boot himself and he tapped his toe in rhythm with the piece, mentally visualizing the bowing, scraping couples on the dance floor. He could hear the gay laughter and the giggling of the girls. Through it sheered the lower voices of the staid old cowmen and their wives who lined the wall to watch their "yearlin's let out their tethers." The music soughed out and began again. This time Old Gramp had selected a hoedown. His voice boomed out the call—

Take yore gal so trim an' neat
Take holt uh her hand an' bow so sweet.
Square off in fours, sashay all—
Whirl with the nearest till you're ready
tuh fall!

Steve's attention was drawn suddenly to the arrival of men at the front door. He looked out of his place of concealment. Through the anteroom door he saw Basalt Baker and Stumpy Joe enter the dance hall. Then Baker's voice sheered through the music. He was speaking to Hamp Carter who confronted him.

"Of course, sheriff," Baker laughed, the first time Steve had ever seen or heard him do so. And he wondered if his was the voice that would identify Arch Prader to Chico Megares. Baker went on. "Shore, it's the best thing tuh do. Reckon me'n my boys don't mind shuckin' our guns, do we, fellas?"

And his hired gunnies surged up behind him, grinning. There wasn't a voice of disapproval among them. Steve felt a vague warning in their readiness to comply with Carter's edict for empty holsters here. Something was wrong. Killers never willingly disarm. Yet he saw them shuck their belts and hand them over to the lawman.

"Jes' a leetle precaution uh mine," Carter said lightly. "We're gunna have fun tonight an' no fireworks iffen I kin help it—not with all the galfolks an' younkers here. Never kin tell what a feller'll do when he's carryin' his tonnage in guns an' Bust Head likker. Yuh kin have 'em back when the frolic's over."

"Bueno," agreed Baker readily, too readily, Steve decided. "Let's jine in the fun, fellers. I'm honin' tuh enjoy myself tuhnight!"

His gunnies made a scramble for the barrel of Bust Head that stood in a corner, tapped and ready for anyone caring to imbibe. Baker's quick agreement to shuck his guns puzzled Steve. And then Carter was taking the mine operator by the arm as he started away.

"Jes' a minute, Basalt," the lawman said sternly. "I want yuh should come tuh my office after the shindig's over. Things I want tuh talk over with yuh."

Baker's owlish eyes held on Carter for a moment, never blinking. Steve could

have sworn a quick flash of fear swept across his hard face and vanished. Then the renegade laughed.

"What's the matter with right now, fella?" he demanded. "I'll prob'ly be busy with my gal when the frolic's over. If yuh got anything tuh say, say it now, Mister Sheriff."

Steve saw Carter's mustache bristle hostilely. "You know what I got tuh say, Baker," his voice came low and heavy, freighted with authority.

"I can't imagine what it could be," Baker bridled, "but if yo're still around when the doin's is over, I'll look yuh up."

And with a low laugh he stalked away. Steve's eyes narrowed. He didn't like the way the renegade said that—*if yo're still around.* It smacked of threat, hinted that Sheriff Hamp Carter was likely to be dead before the evening was over. He felt sure something big was in the air and Baker had schemed it with Arch Prader. And he was sure that the renegades hadn't disarmed completely. They had been too quick to comply with Hamp's demand for empty holsters.

Steve drew back in the closet again to think things over. The pound and scrape of boots, the chime of spurs and the general clamor of the dance sheered through his thoughts. The music droned on with old Gramp and his boys playing a lively reel. Grimly Steve considered the odds against him here and his eyes swept the pegged guns on the opposite wall. He gave birth to an idea.

GINGERLY he stepped across the little room and was gathering up the guns. Then he was tossing them out through the window where, in the darkness, they would be difficult to recover. A grim smile played across his lips as he tossed the last one into the gloom outside. No matter what the intentions of Cowskin were this night, here would be no shooting with those guns when and if any fireworks started.

As he retreated back to the closet again to await developments old Gramp's voice lifted above the clamor. He asked for silence and got it. The crowd half-circled the band-stand upon which were piled the social boxes to be auctioned off.

"Afore we auction off the boxes, folks," the oldster bawled out, "Parson Holcomb has a brief text tuh offer. I reckon yuh-all want tuh hear what he's got tuh say. Take the stand Parson. Let's give him a hand!"

Steve peered into the room as Holcomb mounted the platform amid the clapping of hands in applause. He seemed like a man in a trance. As he turned to face the crowd it seemed that for the first time since leaving his home, there was some color in his gaunt face. His eyes were pinched now and his big hands dangled down close to the tell-tale bulges under his frock coat. For a long moment his eyes roved over the gathering. Steve heard whispers beat up from the crowd, saw Baker, Stumpy Joe and the gunslammers standing near the Bust Head barrel. They were watching Holcomb like hawks.

"Get goin' with yore spiel, skipper!" Baker ground out with sudden impatience. "We want fun 'stead uh text. An' make it short!"

"Yeah," sneered one of his gunslicks, "an' be shore yuh stick tuh yore text, parson."

The wild bunch laughed. Holcomb's chill eyes swept over them and Steve tensed. This was it. Parson Holcomb was going to deliver his final message to his flock. Instead of telling Baker and his gunhawks to their faces just what he thought of them and their alliance with the Devil's Disciples, he was going to preach it to the whole of Cowskin, then let the axe fall where it may.

"He's a fool!" Steve told himself grimly. "They'll kill him the first wrong word he utters!"

Then Holcomb was talking, a strange light in his eyes. That light haunted Steve as he listened, watched. It was like that which comes into the eyes of a man about to be executed.

"Folks," the sky-pilot's voice came strong and clear without the slightest tremor, "when a man takes the devil tuh his bosom he can expect tuh be singed by the fires uh hell. The Good Book says that whosoever fraternizes with snakes, becomes one of them . . ."

"Them same snakes might fang yuh, skipper, if yuh ain't careful!" heckled Baker significantly, winking at his gunnies. "Go light on the text, fella."

A murmur swept through the crowd in protest to the heckling. Holcomb lifted his hand for silence. "Folks," he intoned on, "standin' before yuh here on

this platform is a man in the cloth uh the Lord. The Good Book sayeth tuh look under the skin of uh sheep an' yuh'll find a wolf. I feel it my duty now tuh disrobe such a man before yore eyes an' bare his scarred soul that all might see. There is a wolf in the clothing uh the sheep in this room tuhnight an' I'm goin' tuh expose him tuh the light . . ." he paused dramatically and his eyes roved over the crowd.

Steve Hale stood at the door of the dance hall now, his guns coming from their holsters. His every nerve was taut now. Holcomb, he felt sure, was going to expose the leader of the Disciples along with Baker and his gunslicks. He glanced at Baker. The renegade's face was flushed with hate now and his right hand was hidden inside his coat. There, Steve knew, was a hideout gun. He looked at the others. His blood froze. Hands were inside vests and coats, gripping hidden guns. That was the reason why they had readily accepted Carter's edict.

Even Stumpy Joe who stood beside Baker had his right hand inside his faded shirt and Steve wondered why the corralman was siding the renegades. He gave a sudden start, cursed himself under his breath. It came to him that he'd made a terrible mistake in throwing those guns out the window. Now all men who might have sided the parson stood unarmed. Against that devil's dozen only himself, Hamp Carter and the parson could fight. What a fool he'd been, he told himself, for acting so impulsively in his effort to make sure there would be no gunplay against him by the men of Cowskin. He'd furthered the cause of the renegades, unthinkingly.

GRIMLY his chill eyes swept the crowd, held on Terry who was standing near the platform, her arm carelessly dropped over the narrow shoulders of young Matty, her brother. Then Holcomb's voice drew his attention. His words came softly, yet carried to every corner of the room.

". . . that man, my friends," he intoned, "that I'm goin' tuh lay bare before yuh . . . is your parson, the head uh yore church . . . a wolf in sheep's clothing . . . !"

The crowd gasped as one, looked askance at one another. Steve saw Basalt Baker relax, nudge the gunny next to him. Stumpy Joe remained stoic as an Indian, inscrutable, and his eyes were like twin fires blazing with an insane lust.

Steve was puzzled now. He'd expected Holcomb to unmask Arch Prader, the leader of the Disciples. Instead, here he was unmasking himself as a snake in the grass. But there was a smile on the sky-pilot's hard lips now. He spoke on, his voice lifting with passion.

"I took Satan tuh my bosom, my good friends," he continued, "an' now I expect tuh be burnt in his fires. But in takin' the devil an' his disciples as my friends, I did not grow horns an' spit hate an' death. They pressured me inta ridin' with 'em, but I never fired a gun in their cause. They beat me inta bein' one uh them with the club uh fear. Now I fear no man nor the machinations uh men. I stand free tuh deliver myself, body an' soul, an' I'm deliverin' now.

"Friends, ontil our good brethren, Sheriff Carter, showed me the way years ago, I was a renegade like these wolves in sheep's hides that I been fraternizin' with here in Cowskin. Down on the Big Bend I kilt a man an' come here tuh hide. But my crimes found me out in time an' because uh my daughter, Hamp Carter gave me another chance. I took it an' went straight an' yuh had faith in me. An' then came the wolves tuh Cowskin. They knew uh my past life an' threatened tuh expose it to yuh if I didn't do what they ordered. Friends, Burt Wyatt was one uh them. Boudinot Blanchard was another. Basalt Baker who is here tuhnight is still another. Cash Trotter was in with them. An' there is one other roddin' this band uh the Devil's Disciples—" his voice lifted until it was almost a scream. "My friends, the leader uh the Devil's Disciples is—"

Steve saw Stumpy Joe's hand dart from beneath his shirt too late. Then the crazed corralman fired point blank at the sky-skipper, the room rocking to the concussion. Holcomb reeled back, spun under the impact, and then his guns were bucking in his hands. He triggered twin slugs at Basalt Baker, but that worthy had already ducked and Steve saw him come up behind Terry. There was a mad scramble of the crowd to get out of the way. Basalt jerked out his gun and flung a quick shot over Terry's shoulder at her father.

Again Parson Holcomb staggered. But

with set purpose, his body steeled against death, he flung up his guns, but he dared not shoot at Baker for fear of killing Terry. Steve's guns tipped at the renegade, then swung at the gunnies at the Bust Head barrel. They were crouched about it now, their guns palmed.

Two of them slumped down under Steve's gun-talk. And Holcomb accounted for two more. Then Steve leaped into the room, his guns rocketing. Out of the tails of his eyes he saw Hamp Carter spring into action from the side of the bandstand. Women screamed. Men shouted and stepped in front of them to guard them against stray lead.

Desperately Steve tried to draw a bead on Baker who now was backing off toward the front door, Terry held in front of him as a shield. But to fire at the man the way she was twisting and struggling to break free, was too great a risk to take. He looked for Stumpy Joe, saw him just as he dove through a back window. He fired at the man. But knew he failed to tally, because on his gun echoes floated back the corralman's insane laugh.

Backing through the door Baker's heavy voice lifted above the clamor of gunsounds and the screams of the women. "Git The Gunhawk, fellers!" he shouted. "Gun him down an' make taller out uh him!"

Holcomb's guns barked at the gunnies who were now lined against the wall. Then seeing Baker back out of the hall, panic seemed to grip them. They charged after him wildly, shooting as they went. Bullets hummed close to Steve. He flung lead into the renegades as they boiled from the building, tallied once. The fellow slewed clear around under the impact of the bullet and pitched face down, a thin scream on his lips.

Then Holcomb and Carter were running up to trigger the others as they fled. Steve joined them. They bounced into the street, guns rocketing. But Holcomb was in a bad way, for his body was bent far forward as if to ease the pain of his punctured brisket. Blood wet the front of his long coat and from a crease along his left cheek dribbled thin streams of crimson.

NOW Steve worked his guns without fear of striking innocent people. But the dim light of the moon made for poor shooting. The renegades had dashed for whatever cover they could find and the three had to trigger at the gunflame. Then Steve became aware that a heavy rifle was cracking near him. He looked around, gave a start as he saw little Matty lying in the dust of the street, squirting Sharp's lead at the renegades.

"Give 'em hell, Steve!" the lad yelled at him. "Fat's in the fire an' all hell is fryin'! Boil 'em in their own taller! Baker's got sis an' is beatin' it down tuh Joe's corral fer tuh make a gitaway!"

Steve Hale waited for no more. "See yuh at the corral, Hamp!" he yelled, and high-heeled down the middle of the street with slugs from the renegades kicking up little geysers of dust about him. Then in the moonfog he saw Basalt Baker down at the corral, holding Terry with one arm flung about her while he let down the bars. He ran hard, his guns tipped up. Still, there was no chance of getting the renegade without endangering Terry.

Now the renegade was beating it across the corral to the stalls, carrying Terry in his arms. She was jerking and fighting him. Contempt ran high through Steve for Baker now. The renegade was yellow, hiding behind a woman. Numerous times his guns flipped up, but some fighting movement of Terry held his trigger fingers.

Then from the tails of his eyes he saw a dark figure lurking at the corner of a building across from the corral. In the moonfog he caught the glint of a gunbarrel, the flash of a bright colored serape. He knew Chico Megares stood there, saw his rifle leap to his shoulder. A prayer came to his lips that the little Mexican would not miss Baker and hit Terry Holcomb. A warning cry came to his lips as he ran forward. But Chico's gun cracked a cap before it reached him. The false fronts of the town flung the echoes back and forth and then from the corral came the sharp snap of another rifle.

Chico Megares' little body seemed to leap a foot in the air. A pitiful cry came from his lips. He spun down to lie in a small heap there in the shadows. A curse crowded Steve's lips. With tears welling in his eyes he charged the corral, both guns ready, hammers eared back. From a stall the hidden rifleman shot at him. He felt the slug's hot

breath pass his cheek. Viciously he targeted at the gunman, thinking that Baker, missed by Chico's shot, had taken his stand in the stall.

He charged forward boldly. Then the rifleman tallied. His slug struck him in the leg, spilling him over into the dust and filth. But the momentum of his rush carried him almost to the protection of the stalls. He dragged himself to cover, his head reeling dizzily with pain.

His voice lifted tremulously. "Terry! Where are yuh?"

"Here, Stephen!" she called back frantically. "But stay down! He'll kill—"

Baker's heavy hand slapping across her cheek cut her off. A red haze floated before Steve's eyes and he almost hurled himself forward. The grim realization that if he as much as showed himself now, it would be the end for him and—Terry.

"Yo're yella, Baker!" he screamed. "Come out in the open an' fight like a man!"

Baker's taunting laugh floated back from the stall beyond. "You ain't got a chance tuh win nohow, fella," he shot back. "Stumpy Joe's in the stall right across from yuh with a gun aimed plumb at yore brisket. Stumpy Joe! That's rich, ain't it Stumpy?"

A cackling laugh that froze Steve's blood lifted from the dark stall opposite him. He flipped his guns that way, blinked hard, trying to see.

"I kin jes' make yuh out, Hale," the corralman spoke in his demented voice. "That damn Mex creased me with his smoke-pole. But I reckon he don't do no more creasin' in this vale uh tears. An' neither will yuh! Wait'll I wipe the damn blood from my eyes an' I'll give yuh a quick ticket tuh hell!" His voice trailed out in a ghastly laugh that made the hair on Steve's neck bristle.

"Gun him down, Stumpy!" Baker taunted. "He's got yore name writ on uh empty ca'tridge an' it reads Arch Prader! Git him, fella. He's taller fer yore smoke-pole. I can't see him!"

Stumpy Joe! Arch Prader? Fiendish, diabolical leader of the Devil's Disciples! Incredible! Yet there was no denying it now. Baker had let it out. Steve's fingers tightened on his triggers. Then Prader's crazy laugh was sheering the darkness. "I'm gonna b'ile yuh in yore own grease, Hale," he cackled. "Iffen it hadn't been fer yuh, I'd a owned the whole uh the Pecos Valley. Only regret I got is that I cain't have the privilege uh hangin' yuh tuh a tree like we did tuh yore pappy an' brother. My eyes is clearin' now, button. She's pay-off time in Cowskin. I already paid yore pappy fer what he did tuh me. He won't ever gun-whup another gent, which-like he did tuh me once. An' that damn Mex won't ever trail me no more. I kilt his damn wench an' now I've kilt him. Yo're next, kid. Where yuh want it? 'Tween the eyes or in the brisket where she hurts most?"

A SLITHERING noise came to Steve. Desperately he watched that stall hiding the arch fiend. Prader's shoulders and head pushed forward, cutting a dark block out of the darkness behind him. Suddenly Steve realized that the voice of this man was the one he'd heard that time when the Disciples had captured him. There could be no mistake. Stumpy Joe was Arch Prader. Now he was admitting it.

"I reckon I had everybody fooled, didn't I?" he chuckled. "They didn't think I had the brains of a wood-chuck. But I'm smart, button. I don't mind tellin' yuh that I'm Arch Prader. That's my real name. But it won't ever do yuh any good tuh know because I'm burnin' yuh down now—"

His gun cracked, stabbing the dark with a jet of orange and yellow flame. Steve felt hot lead snag through his shoulder, rendering his left arm useless. His gun fell from his hand. But the other flipped up, bucked. And with the slug that whistled from its bore he wiped out the awful vision of his father and brother swaying beneath the Spur Rowel cottonwoods.

A guttural curse came from Arch Prader's insane lips as he pitched down, writhed in a little splash of moonlight, and lay still. Then Steve was lunging toward Baker's stall. A scream from Terry halted him and he saw her burst from the stall and dart into the darkness behind the silent form of Prader.

"Watch out, Stephen!" she called. "He's right in front of you!"

Steve launched himself forward, straightened as he came face to face with

Basalt Baker there in the gloom. Both guns seemed to bark as one. Gunflame seared Steve's bared chest as the renegade's bullet slid like a hot poker through the fleshy part of his arm-pit. The dim-form before him was reeling, groping for an imaginary support. Then Basalt Baker was writhing down in the filth of the stall, his eyes white and large. The thump of his body told Steve that he had tallied. His fury still unsatisfied, he bent over, struck blindly with the barrel of his gun.

There came a low crunch of crushing bone, and he knew that Basalt Baker would never again slap a defenseless woman. Then a spasm of agony ripped through him, bringing dizziness. The world seemed suddenly to spin before him, sapping his last strength. He eased himself down, a rumbling in his ears like the roar of a mammoth cataract. Consciousness fled him and he knew no more until he found himself staring through lantern light into the tear-drenched eyes of Terry Holcomb.

He felt dreamy, tired, knew that he was lying on the ground somewhere, his head pillowed in Terry's lap. A murmur of voices brought his eyes shuttling about him. A ring of people hemmed him. Their faces were not hostile now. They were smiling. Eyes glowed with open admiration.

"Shot tuh doll rags," Hamp Carter was saying to someone, "but he'll live. Takes more'n a few slugs tuh kill The Gunhawk. Folks, Cowskin owes this fella an official apology an' uh debt uh thanks. He wiped out the Devil's Disciples like he said he'd do, an' who'd ever thunk that the men he gunned down was them?"

Then his view of the ring of faces about him was suddenly obstructed as Terry bent down and kissed his feverish forehead. "Oh, Stephen," she sobbed. "I'm so glad it's all over now . . ."

He gave her a weak smile. "Me too, honey," he murmured. "Tell me—is Chico an' yore dad all right?"

She nodded. "Dad's hurt bad," she breathed, "but he'll live. The church has forgiven him his sins and nothing could kill him now . . ."

"Yeah," put in little Matty as he knelt down and took Steve's big hand in his small ones, "an' pop's some punkin' with a pair uh hawg-laigs, ain't he? He fried them renegades in their own dang taller, gunned 'em to uh fare thee well afore they got him down. But yuh ain't no gun-dummy yoreself, Steve, ol' son, takin' on Basalt Baker an' Arch Prader thataway. Shucks wisht I'd a been here tuh see the frolic."

HAMP CARTER spoke up. "That Mex friend uh yores, Steve," he said smilingly, "is plenty tough. He ain't hurt none a-tall. The galoot that shot at him missed him an' hit his rifle barrel. It flew up an' clouted him on the jaw. Knocked him clean out. He's already lit fer yore ranch tuh git things ready fer yuh."

Steve smiled, relaxed. "Well, I've lived up tuh my promises tuh dad an' Johnny," he said softly. "Now I can go home an' rest in peace if—Terry'll go with me. How about it, honey?"

Terry flushed, hung her head. Matty got up disgustedly.

"Take him up on it, sis," he said. "Yuh need a man tuh look out fer yuh now seein' as how I done fell fer Sarah Fannin at the jig tuhnight. I won't have no more time tuh look out fer yuh, what with her rushin' me."

The crowd laughed freely. "How about it, Terry honey?" Steve said softly through a grin.

Terry nodded. "I'd love it, Stephen," she whispered, and their lips met as the crowd made way for the doctor.

Matty nudged old Hamp Carter and made a wry face.

"Ain't that jest too sweet fer words, Sheriff?" he said. "Beats shucks how a woman'll swear up an' down she wouldn't marry the best man on earth, then turn right aroun' an' kiss one smack in front uh everybody. An' no matter how bad a feller is shot up, he's still got enough taw left in his gizzard tuh make love."

And the doctor roughly shoved him out of the way.

Pasear to Boothill

by KEN JASON

Author of "Land of the Gun Damned," etc.

Fate, in her inscrutable processes, decreed that Red Munson should climax his dry-gulcher's career with a mercy act, when he left Sheriff Dent thonged beside a bubbling spring—to die from thirst's withering torture!

"WATER! Water!" Sheriff Dent's hands dug into the loose, hot sand, and his bloodshot eyes looked dully up at the horse and rider.

"Water!" he croaked again, then sprawled unconscious at the horse's feet.

The short, squat rider swung a thick leg over the horse's back and slid to the desert sand. As he stared down at the prone man, his face darkened and his eyes narrowed. He stooped and removed the gun from the sheriff's holster, stuck it into his own belt.

The sheriff roused, "Water!" he whispered. "Sprained ankle. Horse threw me—bolted."

The squat man caught him by the shoulder and shook him.

"Look at me, Dent!" he rasped. "Look who' found you!"

Slowly, recognition crept into the sheriff's dazed eyes and, for a moment, hate replaced the look of torture on his lean, sun-browned face.

"Red Munson," he muttered.

Munson, outlaw and killer, grinned. "I reckon, Dent, your time has come," he said. "I reckon you've chased me out of Marvel Desert for the last time. Dent, I hate you! I'm goin' to finish you!"

The words were wasted upon the sheriff. His aching eyes were fixed now on the two canteens hung on the outlaw's saddle. His tongue slid over cracked lips, and his arms reached toward the canteens.

"Water," he gasped.

The outlaw drew his gun, paused, then slowly returned it to the holster. A crafty look came over his face.

"Dent," he said softly, "I'm goin' to take you for a ride."

With powerful arms, he lifted the sheriff to the horse's back, then climbed on behind.

A half hour's ride brought them to a clump of stunted trees at the foot of a low hill. The shade was cool, and the ground was damp. A small spring of water bubbled out of the hillside and made a pool in a natural rock basin.

Munson gave Dent a shove, and the sheriff sprawled to the ground within six feet of the water's edge. The smell and sight of the cool liquid threw him into a

frenzy. With a choked cry, he crawled frantically toward the pool.

Just as his mouth came within an inch of the water, rough hands caught his shoulders and hurled him back. He fell against a tree.

Munson laughed. "I'm surprised at you, Dent. Why, you ain't even thanked me for the ride. Ain't you got no manners?"

Dazed, Dent stared blankly at the outlaw. Slowly, the truth dawned in his numbed brain. Munson had brought him here only to torture him.

The outlaw led his horse to the pool and let the animal drink thirstily.

"My poor old horse was just dyin' for a drink," he said, "and to think you'd want to drink before he did. Dent, I'm ashamed of you."

Suddenly, Dent lunged toward the pool. Munson caught him by the hair and held his face a few inches above the water.

"Now, now, Dent!" He laughed. "I didn't think you'd act this way."

With a powerful heave, he again flung the sheriff against the tree. Stunned, and too weak to fight back, Dent slumped as he had landed, his back against the tree, his arms limp at his sides.

Munson took a rope from the saddle and swaggered toward him.

"I reckon I'd better tie you, Dent. Seems as though you've lost all your politeness."

When he had bound the sheriff to the tree, he returned to the pool and drank heavily, then splashed the water over his face. Dent watched in helpless agony. His swollen tongue lolled out of his mouth, and he tugged vainly at his bonds.

Laughing uproariously, Munson unhooked the canteens from the saddle and carried them to the pool.

"Reckon I'll fresh these up," he said.

Grinning, he let the water gurgle out of the canteens to the ground. He refilled them at the spring, put them back on the saddle, and turned to Dent.

"Sorry, but I must be leavin' you. Have a nice afternoon, sheriff."

He swung into the saddle and rode away, his raucous laughter floating back to the half-crazed man tied to the tree.

AS Dent again slumped back against the tree, he felt a sharp jab in the small of his back. By tugging and twisting, he managed slowly to work himself far enough around the tree to get his fingers on the sharp object. It was a rusty nail.

For an hour, he worked the rope back and forth across that nail, parting the strands and severing them one at a time. For an hour, he hung on to consciousness by sheer nerve.

At last, the rope gave way, and Dent was free. He fell to his hands and knees and began crawling toward the pool.

He heard a horse clatter up behind him. Fear that Red Munson had returned gave Dent new strength. He lunged to the edge of the basin, and thrust his head down toward the water, but again, before he could drink, he was pulled away.

Hopelessly, he looked up to see old Tom Bryan, a prospector, handing him a canteen. He clutched it frantically and, at last drank.

When he had finished, he saw that the old prospector was silently pointing toward the tree. Dent's eyes fixed on a crude, cardboard sign that was held in place by the nail that had set him free. On it, in dim letters, was scrawled, "DANGER. WATER CONTAMINATED. DO NOT DRINK."

Dent remembered that Red Munson had drunk that water—lots of it. . . .

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Trails

SMASHING NOVELETTE
by JOHN CODY

With his free arm Vance grasped the knife hand of Lanford

The inexorable vengeance law of the North's frozen wastes claimed Vance Meredith for a tomahawk gauntlet—to atone for the cold-steel crucifixion of his slaughtered father!

THE long awaited chinook marked the passing of one of the most severe winters ever experienced in the northern territory. For weeks, driving, howling blizzards piled snow deep in draws and canyons. Temperatures ranged to sixty below and lakes and streams were frozen wastes of white.

But now with the warm spring wind the whole country was transformed as if by magic. Snow disappeared before the eyes and rivers rose to seething torrents. The leaden skies vanished and the warm sun shone down brightly from a sky of azure blue.

The lateness of the season had caused weeks delay for rendezvous to hundreds of trappers throughout the fur frontier. It was for this reason that Vance Meredith and his partner sought to take their winter's catch in a canoe down the treacherous current of the Milk River.

The mighty stream was swollen. The swift waters rose from bank to bank and the swirling eddies pitched the small craft as if it were a piece of cork. But years of experience had taught the two expert paddlemen to hold it on an even keel.

Vance Meredith was a veteran of the wilderness, though he was still in his

early twenties. He was born in a remote trading post when the Louisiana Territory was an unchartered wilderness. Galt Meredith had gone into the territory shortly after the return of the Lewis and Clark expedition. With him went his bride, a frail, courageous girl who was to give glorious heritage to generations of frontier men and women. At the birth of their first child, the small, brave girl was unable to stand the hardships of the wilderness. She died, leaving Galt Meredith with the infant, Vance, to raise and educate in the Jesuit missions at the fur trading posts.

Through the years Vance and his father blazed frontier trails; they took riches from the streams and mountains. In time Galt Meredith made enough to start a trading post of his own, Fort Marietta. He named it in memory of Marietta, Ohio, where he had taken his bride. As time progressed the post flourished. Trappers from far and wide made rendezvous there because of the square deal that they received from the old frontiersman.

Now Vance was returning after an absence of two years. He and his grizzled old partner, Jeeb Maloof had gone into Canada to stake out new fur trails. The expedition was successful but Vance was looking forward to his return in keen anticipation. He was looking forward to the reunion with his father. To his renewal of acquaintances with the attaches of the post. Joel Farley, the assistant factor, and then there was Joel's long-legged and freckled-faced brat, as Vance called her, Mary.

Ahead, the river broke into a churning cataract. Vance saw the white sprays of water as they lashed against outcropping rocks. He called to the old trapper in the front end of the canoe.

"There's the rapids, old-timer," he shouted above the roar of the current. "I suppose you'll want to be soft and make a portage."

"Huh," growled old Jeeb Maloof. "Never saw the day yet when I was afraid tuh shoot them rapids."

Vance grinned widely as he swept the paddle out and started the canoe into shore. Old Jeeb followed suit. In spite of their taunts both men knew better than to try to shoot a cataract that would mean certain suicide.

With powerful strokes they fought the current into the bank. When the prow grated sand, Jeeb leaped from his position and hauled the boat in. Vance marvelled at the spryness with which the oldster handled himself. Inwardly he thought that Jeeb Maloof would be a match for men many years younger. A life in the outdoors had kept his gnarled body as strong as whang leather and he had an endurance that even Vance was hard put to equal.

They pulled the loaded canoe on to dry ground and laid the paddles atop the bales of furs. Then, grasping it at either end, they raised it up and started the portage.

THE melting snow made the trail soft and muddy but the two trappers had little trouble negotiating the trek around the rapids. It was midday and the sun was bright and warm. Trees and willows were budding and the crisp air carried the pungent smell of spring. Squirrels chattered in the trees and here and there a blue jay scolded at the passing trappers.

As he strode along a river chant burst forth from the younger man. It echoed and re-echoed among the trees and hills. The oldster grunted in disgust and plodded along. Once he turned around to Vance.

"You must be thinkin' about that gal at yore paw's place," he growled. "The way you're warblin'."

"You mean Mary?" asked Vance surprised. Then he grinned. "It will be good to see her. I got a lot of fun out of teasin' her and watchin' her get mad as hell."

"She's goin' tuh be teasin' you some day, younker," replied Jeeb. "An' then she'll watch you get mad as hell."

"What are you talkin' about, Jeeb?" asked Vance suddenly sober. "She's only a little kid."

"She ain't always goin' tuh be a little kid, though," said the old man.

Vance meditated on old Jeeb Maloof's words as they continued on in silence. At the end of the portage they again slid the canoe into the water and pushed out into the stream. That was the last portage between them and the post and Vance's eagerness rose to even greater heights. Again the wild *chanson* rolled out over the water.

Ahead, the river made a wide, sweep-

ing turn. The oldster turned around to Vance. His sour look, for once, was gone.

"Around the corner, younker," he cackled. "An' am I dry for a snort of keel-aged rum."

"There'll be plenty of it there," said Vance. "Fort Marietta should be filled with trappers by now."

The river had levelled out now and the current carried them swiftly along. Only a slight dip with the paddle occasionally was necessary to keep the little canoe going straight.

They swept around the turn and strained their eyes toward the far bank. Fort Marietta was only a half-mile ahead. They could see some of the buildings that were nearer to the shore. Suddenly a look of apprehension and wonder crossed Vance's features.

"Does anything look wrong to you down there, Jeeb?" he asked quickly.

"I've been thinkin' about it ever since we came around the turn," muttered the oldster. "It looks like there's plenty wrong. There ain't a single boat at the wharf."

There was no smile on Vance's broad, flat face now. His lips drew into a tight line. He hunched his broad shoulders and drew the paddle in a powerful sweep through the water. The canoe lurched forward and old Jeeb drew himself tense and matched the strokes of the younger man.

It was only a few moments later that they pulled up to the rough pine jetty that projected out into the river. A single canoe was tied there and it was so battered that it was no longer useful. There wasn't a solitary person at the wharf.

The ominous facts cast a pall of despair over Vance. There should have been hundreds of boats tied up and scattered along the bank. At this time of the year each new arrival at the post was given a joyful reception. Trappers lined the banks at the first sight of all newcomers and there were shouts and waving rum jugs.

Now all of that was gone and there was the silence of the tomb around Fort Marietta.

"Deserted," stated Vance hollowly.

"It's been two years, younker," said the old man. "An' we didn't have no word at all. A lot can happen in that time."

"I can't believe that Dad would abandon Fort Marietta," replied Vance dismally. "I wonder whatever in hell could have happened."

They walked slowly up the bank. With each step the leaden weight in his heart increased. A strong feeling of fear gripped him. He knew something dreadful must have happened. Galt Meredith would never have abandoned Fort Marietta for some place in a better location. There was too strong a sentiment attached to the place. To Vance it was the only place he had ever called home. And then, the post had flourished only two short years ago.

Jeeb Maloof started to speak but his words died on his lips almost before they were uttered. Both men came to an abrupt stop. Vance brought his great head erect and keened his ears for the sound that he had just heard to be repeated. He wanted assurance that it wasn't a product of his imagination.

It did come again and this time there was no uncertainty as to its being real. It was a low groan and its weird, eerie sound shattered the silence. And there was no doubt that it was made by a human being.

"There is somebody here," Vance grated harshly. "And he's in a hell of a lot of misery!"

CHAPTER II

Wilderness Spoilers

HURRIEDLY they made their way up the slope that led to the gate of the log stockade. The gate was open and there was no sign of life either on the outside or inside. The compound was empty making a sharp contrast of the teeming activity that Vance had known when he last saw Fort Marietta.

They drew to a halt and stood in silence for a moment. Then the sound came again. This time louder and more horrible than before. And it was coming from just inside the gate.

Vance raced through the opening with old Jeeb Maloof close behind. They rounded the corner and as they did so came to an abrupt stop. Vance recoiled

a step as if he had been struck with a solid body blow. "Dad!" he cried in an agonizing voice.

The eerie groan, the complete silence around the post or any of the other things that were out of the ordinary, could not have prepared for the awful spectacle which confronted Vance and his old partner. It was too horrible and inhuman for any mind to conceive.

Galt Meredith was there against the stockade. His arms were spread out against the logs and a long-bladed skinning knife was driven through either hand. He was bared to the waist and a rifle bayonet had been thrust through his middle. He was nailed to the stockade with knives and bayonets. His head was a mass of bruised flesh, showing signs of beating either before or after he had been crucified on the stockade.

At his side was another man fastened in like manner and Vance recognized him instantly as Joel Farley. The lusterless look in the man's eyes told Vance that Joel Farley had ceased to feel pain. Galt Meredith was still alive.

Blinded by grief, Vance rushed to the stricken man's side. As tenderly as was possible he eased the bayonet from out of Galt Meredith's body. Then he drew the knives from his hands. Then he laid him gently on the ground. Jeeb Maloof cut down the body of Joel Farley.

Vance knelt beside his sire. He cradled the gray head in his huge arm. The old man opened his eyes as much as he could.

"It's me, Dad," said the boy. "Vance."

"My son," murmured the oldster. "I knew you'd come back. That's all I was waitin' for."

"Who did it, Dad?" said Vance quickly. "Who was it?"

"They raided us," Galt Meredith continued weakly. "They got me an' Joel. They took Mary along . . ." His voice was coming in weak gasps now. "They—"

"Who was it?" Vance repeated. "Please tell me who, Dad."

"It was—it was—" the old man's voice failed. His head dropped over on his chest and the answer to Vance's question was sealed with Galt Meredith's lips.

Vance flung his head on to the broad chest of the dead man and buried his face. For a long time he stayed thus. Old Jeeb Maloof watched silently. No trace of emotion crossed his grizzled features. There was no disgust for a show of grief on the part of a man of the wilderness. Jeeb Maloof understood.

When Vance raised up again his face was tight and drawn. "Who do you reckon done it, Jeeb?" he asked. Indians?"

"Looks like Injun work," stated the old man laconically. "Don't know why, though. "Wasn't a tribe in a hundred miles that wasn't friendly with yore paw."

"Maybe it was some renegade tribe that came into the country after we left," said Vance. "Anyway, I aim to find out. We'll visit Flying Eagle's camp when we leave here. He'll know if anybody does."

It was then that they saw other gruesome signs of the brutal raid on the post. A man's body lay a few feet beyond, between them and the post headquarters. They made a tour inspection and found others lying in heaps where they had made their last desperate stand.

Vance was sickened at the signs of desolation and vandalism that had been visited on the once prosperous trading post. There were signs of terrific struggle. Bullet holes dotted the walls of the buildings, both inside and outside. Bloodstains covered the floors of the post headquarters and the guns of the defenders lay strewn about.

The post had been rifled clean of its furs. Every part of the stores that had not been carried away was destroyed. In the office of Galt Meredith they found the safe door hanging open. All of the gold had been taken also. It was a clean wipe-out. All of the time Vance kept his eyes open and he was thinking.

It was nearly sundown when Vance and old Jeeb finished burying the victims of the massacre. They used a plot of ground at the far end of the stockade and at the head of each mound of earth they fashioned a rude wooden cross. When they had finished they knelt with bared heads for a long time to pay homage to those who had so valiantly tried to defend their post. Then they rose and silently moved away.

"I've come to one conclusion, Jeeb," said Vance finally when they had again reached the post headquarters. "This raid wasn't made by Indians."

"What makes yuh think so?" asked

the old man.

"Every sign points to the fact that they didn't do it," Vance told him. "You'll notice there isn't a sign of an arrow any place around. None of the men was tomahawked and none of them was scalped. Indians usually raid at dawn and this one took place this morning long after dawn."

"You're right, younker," exclaimed the oldster. "It wasn't Injuns at all. It was renegade whites."

"It's certainly that," said Vance. "But who was it. We haven't got a clue to work on. I don't know of a single person who had it in for Dad that much."

The sun had now dropped behind the shadowy hills and the first traces of dusk gathered. There was a lull in the conversation and then suddenly a harsh voice sheared the evening quiet.

"Get your hands up, boys, and don't move! We've got yuh covered."

CHAPTER III

Renegade Indictment

BOTH Vance and old Jeeb stiffened at the sudden command. Then without a word or a move of protest, they complied, putting their hands high above their heads.

They heard the crunching of feet in the gravel of the compound. They were unable as yet to see their captors. The three men came around to face them. There was still plenty of light to get a good view of the three.

The one who had given the rough order and was obviously the leader was a huge man. His mighty shoulders cut a great chunk from the gloom. He was dressed in dirty buckskins and a heavy mat of black whiskers covered his face. Two small, ferret eyes peered out through the whiskers. Now he grinned evilly at the trappers.

"Caught yuh red-handed, huh," he rumbled heavily. "I must say yuh made a complete job of it."

"Get to the point, Mister," snapped Vance quickly. "What're yuh drivin' at?"

"I'd say it was obvious," replied the big man. "Nice, prosperous post here. Now look at it."

"I'm afraid you're barkin' up the wrong tree, stranger," Vance grated. "It happened that this post belonged to my Dad. It wouldn't be likely that I'd be raiding my own father."

"And it might be all the more reason," said the big man. "Son wants what his father has so he—"

With a savage growl Vance lunged toward the man. "You dirty, low-down rat," he began. Then he was suddenly stopped when two knives flashed to his abdomen. The two other men had stepped in.

"Nice work, Lubec and Pierre," he complimented them. He turned to Vance. "You see, I have my men trained well."

Vance took notice of the two others now. They were smaller than their leader but they appeared to be tough customers and they were of Canuck blood. One of them wore a bright colored *capote* and the other was clad in the conventional buckskin.

"We're wastin' time here," continued the big man. "We should be getting on. Now if you boys will just step along." He prodded a knife into Vance's back. One of the others took care of Jeeb Maloof.

With the three intruders at his rear and Jeeb at his side, Vance moved out of the gate of the stockade. Through the gloom he could see the canoes of the intruders tied at the wharf. They had paddled into the post while Vance and the oldster were burying the dead. How long they had been there, Vance could not contemplate. Perhaps they had been watching the two men for some time.

What their purpose was in making them captive, he did not know. At any rate it bade no good for Vance and his companion. They were plainly renegade type and Vance had strong suspicions that they were in some way connected with the Fort Marietta massacre.

He made a silent vow to find out and then the thought suddenly struck him that if he were captured his chances for bringing the renegade murderers to justice would be lessened many fold.

He flashed a look at the old man by his side and Jeeb Maloof gave the indication that he understood. They marched on in silence for a moment and then suddenly whirled on their captors.

The attack came as a surprise to the three men. They stepped back as the two infuriated trappers lunged toward them. Vance chose the biggest of the three for his antagonist. As he rushed he shot a knotted fist into the man's face. He shot another before the other could gain his composure. When he did, the two grappled. Vance felt two crushing arms go around his chest and they rolled to the ground.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see old Jeeb Maloof tangling with one of the Canucks. The oldster was tricky enough to keep himself away from the other so that only one could handle him at a time.

Vance worked an arm free and slashed a hand into the big renegade's hairy face. He got a good solid blow in return. The man tried to go for his knife and Vance shot out a hand to arrest the arm on its downward motion.

Twice more they rolled over on the trail and then Vance was on top. Suddenly Jeeb's crackling voice cut the silence. "Vance, look out!" he screeched.

The young trapper ducked by instinct but he was too slow to dodge the blow. He felt a heavy blow on his head and he felt himself sinking. He tried to fight off the wave of nausea that closed over him but it was no use. The light faded and a heavy blackness closed over him. . . .

It was still darkness when Vance regained his senses. The moon was high, like a single great eye watching from above and it bathed the whole wilderness in a pale glow. Vance felt himself being carried along with a rapid motion and he heard the lapping of water. When full consciousness struck, he realized that he was in a canoe. His hands and feet were securely bound and his head ached mercilessly where the blow had struck him.

He tried to struggle in the bottom of the boat and a harsh laugh grated his ears.

"So, you thought you would fight me," the man laughed. "You will find out in time that it does not pay to fight Nolan Lanford."

Vance looked around for the others and then he saw their canoe only a few feet to the rear. The other two had evidently taken care of old Jeeb.

He turned to Lanford. "If it's all the same to you," he said. "Would you mind telling where you are taking us."

"We're taking you to the chief," replied Nolan Lanford. "He'll be very much interested in seeing you. It's about a little matter of some furs. The furs you stole from Fort Marietta."

A SUDDEN flash of hope shot through Vance's mind. That last statement made Lanford and the two Canucks certain to be connected with the raid on the post. But they had failed to find the furs. Galt Meredith had them cached. If they were at the same place they had always been, Vance knew where they were.

That had been the big renegade's reason for coming back to the fort. Some way, he knew that Vance would be there.

He turned back toward Lanford. "I don't know where the furs are," he shot at him. "But if I did I'd see you in hell before I'd tell you."

"We have ways of making you tell," the man replied. "You will change your mind soon. We have somebody there that maybe will change it for you." Once again his face split in an evil grin.

Vance's face went suddenly white as the meaning of Lanford's words struck him. "You wouldn't dare do anything like that," he rasped.

"The chief does lots of things if he is made to," said the big renegade.

It was certain that Mary Farley was a captive in the renegade camp and that they were planning to use her to get the location of the fur cache out of Vance. They might go to extremes to do it, too. The furs of Fort Marietta were a prize worth going to extreme measures for. Hundreds of thousands of dollars might be involved.

It was perhaps an hour later when Vance felt the canoe bite into the current and head toward shore. From his cramped position in the bottom he could see nothing, but he could hear the low jumble of voices. He felt the boat being hauled on to solid ground. Then he was pulled roughly out. The other boat had landed by now and Jeeb emerged from it. The bonds were removed from their feet so they could walk under their own power but their arms were left securely trussed.

There were loud voices and coarse laughs from the assemblage. Vance noticed the jumbled races and languages.

Some were Americans and some were Canucks. There were half-breeds and Indians. And they were all plainly a band of cutthroats.

The two prisoners were prodded roughly along with the gathering. Burning pitch flares lit the way and there was much shouting and revelry. Most of them were drunk and Vance felt a shudder at being helpless among the bloodthirsty throng. Inflamed with liquor and the lust to kill, they would stop at nothing.

They were dragged into a circle of buildings. In the center was a low house that was larger than the rest and a blaze of lights shot forth from the windows. More men greeted them there and they were as wild as the others.

At the door of the central building they stopped. Nolan Lanford drew Vance erect.

"You're going to see the chief now," he said. "So conduct yourself with respect. Jules Colette commands the respects of his subjects and he demands it from his prisoners. Govern yourself accordingly."

With a roaring laugh he shoved the two men inside the building.

It was brilliantly lighted and the interior was filled with men. Vance was amazed at the size of the renegade throng that the man Jules Colette had gathered together. There were hundreds of them. It was no wonder that the comparably small garrison a Fort Marietta had fallen easy prey to them.

The prisoners were led through the crowd to the far end of the room and there the throng of humanity ceased. For a space of twenty feet there was a clearing and in a rawhide chair that was raised above the rest of the assemblage sat a man. The man was Jules Colette. He sat on a throne. A ruler of a lawless empire.

Vance scrutinized him with awe. This was a country where size and strength were paramount. Jules Colette had neither. His slight body was almost withered and his arms were thin. He wore heavy spectacles and a thin wisp of black hair grew from his narrow head. He seemed to be only a spectre of a man but his black eyes were alive. They fascinated Vance and drew his attention to them.

It was then that he realized the power this ruler held over his renegade band. Jules Colette wasn't a man. He was a brain. A brain to command and to conjure plans for the overthrow and control of the whole fur empire.

A stillness had settled over the room and then the voice from the throne sheared the tense atmosphere.

"I was told you would come and see me," said Jules Colette and his voice was the strangest Vance had ever heard. It wasn't high pitched and it wasn't low. It was monotonous but it was dynamic. He went on. "We have much to talk about, you and me."

"Speak your piece and have it over with, Colette," ground out Vance. "It won't do you any good but I'll listen."

"You will be wise to listen, my young friend," replied the renegade leader. "You have seen a part of what I can do. I can do much more."

"I know what you're going to say," said Vance. "So quit beating around the bush and come to the point."

"Very well," said Jules Colette. "I shall. You of course know the location of the Fort Marietta fur cache?"

"I don't know where it is," grated Vance. "But if I did I'd burn in hell before I'd tell you where it is."

"I have no doubt you would," said the small man. "But that might be easy on you compared to other things. I was told you'd be stubborn." He turned to Nolan Lanford. "Bring the girl," he commanded curtly.

THE big renegade was away at the order and Vance marvelled at the manner in which this huge trapper jumped at a command given by one who was a third his size. Nolan Lanford was gone only a moment and he returned leading a disheveled but defiant girl.

She was led into the circle and Vance stood watching her. He couldn't believe that this was Mary Farley. He had left her as a child and now she was a young woman. Her tawny hair was down and it flowed about her small shoulders. She wore a buckskin dress that showed the fullness of her young body. There was no trace of fear in her blue eyes and she smiled lightly when she saw Vance.

"Mary," he gasped. "I can't believe it."

"Yes, Vance," she said. "It's me. Your brat's grown up."

Her smile faded and she became serious. "Whatever they do, Vance, don't tell them a thing."

Again Jules Colette interrupted. "That's enough of the greetings," he said. "Let's get down to business."

Before Vance spoke he let his eyes rove around the room. All looks were centered on them. The revelry of a few minutes before had all vanished and not a smile crossed the faces of the renegade crew. At Vance's side old Jeeb Maloof watched defiantly and Vance felt a strong admiration for the old trapper. He knew that if worst came to worst the grizzled old man would go down fighting without a murmur of protest.

"Yes, Colette," Vance said finally. "Let's get down to business."

"Before our little interruption," the renegade leader began. "I asked you a question about the Fort Marietta fur cache. I want very much to know. You could save us all so much trouble by telling." He paused and then went on. "This beautiful girl here. You wouldn't want anything to happen to her, would you?"

"If you so much as—" Vance began harshly.

"Wait." Jules Colette put up his hand for silence. "I'm not one to rush things. You don't have to tell me now. I can give you tonight to think about it. Perhaps in the morning you will look at things differently. I regret having to lock you up now. It's not in keeping with my usual hospitality. But of course you understand."

The guards took the three prisoners and led them away. Vance's eyes sought out Mary's and a look of understanding passed between them. Vance saw the truth and courage there. He knew that whatever happened she would take it without a whimper and he knew she would never suffer if it was in his power to prevent it.

As they passed by the circle of renegades he noticed a blanketed Indian who had been paying more than usual attention to the proceedings. Vance thought there was a sign of recognition there but the Indian was heavily daubed with paint and his stoical features betrayed no emotions. They went along past the warrior.

They were led outside the main building to where three others were set apart. Vance, Mary and old Jeeb Maloof were each put in a separate cabin and the door was bolted from the outside. A guard was posted at each one to make doubly sure there could be no chance of escape.

Vance looked around the darkened room. The cabin was apparently bare. There was a barred window in one side and the moonlight streamed in through it.

After the heavy plank bolt on the outside was slipped into place he heard receding footsteps as Nolan Lanford went back to the post headquarters.

CHAPTER IV

Law of the Savage

SOON the wild revelry of the renegade camp was renewed. The pause during the appearance of the prisoners before Jules Colette had only served as a breathing spell and now they went at it with more reckless abandon than before. Vance knew that it would probably last thus until dawn.

He sat back on the floor with his face toward the open window and started thinking. Jules Colette would demand an answer in the morning as to the location of the fur cache. It had been shown that he was ruthless in his methods and Vance realized ruefully that he had only one course open to him. Colette might not stick to his word but he had to gamble that there might be at least a shred of honor in the makeup of the renegade boss.

His mind sought out methods for possible escape. Two or three he figured out and discarded them as impracticable. The window was barred and the door was bolted. He had no tool or implement of any kind with which to work. His knife had been taken away from him when he was first captured.

He went to the window to see if there was any place where it would be possible to loosen one of the wooden beams. Suddenly he heard a light movement outside. He ducked back into the shadow and stood breathlessly. The movement came nearer and a shadow fell across the window. He wondered if the guard had heard his stirrings on the inside.

Now the footsteps ceased on the outside and Vance realized that the intruder was right under the window. There was a long pause and then came the low sound of a voice and Vance was electrified.

"Vance Meredith," the voice said and it was in the broken dialect of the Blackfoot tongue.

The recognition struck him like a bolt. It was the Indian that had been there inside the post headquarters. He raised up the window and looked outside. Then the crouched figure pressed close to the building. He called softly and the Indian looked up.

"Does my white friend know me," said the crouching red man.

Vance paused for a moment and then the thought struck him. "Flying Eagle!" he exclaimed. "You were in there with them."

"Yes, I was there," replied Flying Eagle. "I have been with the white devil since they murdered your kind father. I knew you would come soon."

At the mention of his father, Vance became suddenly grim. "Who was it that murdered my father, Eagle Feather?" he asked in the native Indian tongue.

"It is Jules Colette who murders all of them," went on Flying Eagle softly. "He has the devil in his brain. But the one called Lanford is the one who kills."

"So it was Lanford who actually did it," said Vance quietly. "That makes a personal score to even with him as well as Colette." He paused and then went on. "That is if I ever get a chance."

"You will get that chance," said the Indian. "Before the sun rises in the heavens."

Vance's head came erect like a bolt. "What was that?" he asked quickly.

"You are going to escape," said the Blockfoot chief. "When I open the prison gate for you there will be no guard here. You must get the girl and get her away at once. When dawn comes we will all escape."

Flying Eagle had spoken few words but the meaning of those words to Vance would have filled volumes. Flying Eagle was away from the window like a shadow and Vance stole quietly to the other side of the room. He waited breathlessly for a few moments and then there was the faintest trace of a sound outside. It was the sound of the bolt being slid from its place. The door opened softly.

The Indian stepped inside the casement. He extended his hand and Vance saw in it the glittering blade of a knife. "This," said the Indian. "Will be your only weapon."

He took the knife from Flying Eagle's hand and slid it into his belt. He eased outside and to the front of the doorstep he saw a grotesque heap sprawled on the ground. It was the sprawled figure of the man who had been on guard. Vance marvelled at the way the Indian had tomahawked the luckless guard without the slightest trace of a sound.

Again the Blackfoot spoke. "I shall release your friend while you go after the girl."

Keeping in the shadows, Vance slid along the side of the buildings. At intervals he stopped to be sure that he hadn't been apprehended. Mary Farley was being held in the cabin at the far end of the compound.

When he reached the prison cabin he stopped at the corner. The guard was standing in the doorway only a few feet from Vance, but his back was to the door and it would be impossible to approach him without him seeing. He searched his mind for some way to outwit the renegade. Suddenly he got an idea.

He reached to the ground and picked up a small stone. He gave it a light toss and the pebble arced out over the guard's head. It lit a little ways beyond.

The man snapped erect and looked in the direction of the noise. His back was turned toward Vance and the young trapper seized upon the fleeting opportunity. He made a lunge toward the cabin door. The man whirled around but it was too late. He didn't have time even to cry out. Vance's mighty fist shot out and caught him on the point of the chin. He collapsed without a sound.

VANCE stood silently for a moment. He was certain that nobody had heard. There were no sounds other than those of the wild revelry that came from the other side of the compound. He looked toward the west and saw that the moon was dropping into the pine timber. It would soon be dawn. There was much to be done before that.

He pressed himself close to the door of the cabin. He tapped lightly.

"Mary," he called softly.

There was a sudden stir from within. Vance lifted the bolt from its slots and pushed the door open. Mary Farley stood there in open-mouthed wonder. "Vance," she whispered hoarsely when she recognized him. "How did you get here?"

He found himself suddenly being enraptured at her beauty. He stood speechless for a moment and then continued. "We're going to escape," he told her. "Flying Eagle, the Blackfoot chief, is going to help us."

He took her by the arm and started looking about for a way to get to the outer circle of the compound. There would be sentries posted every few feet out there and it would take extreme caution to keep from being spotted.

They moved a few feet and then stopped. Again they started and suddenly Vance detected a movement at the opposite side of the cabin. He pulled Mary roughly into the shadows and they waited breathlessly.

Presently the strident voice of Nolan Lanford called out. "Who's there?"

Vance made no answer and the big renegade started catfooting toward them. He passed the corner of the cabin and kept getting closer and closer. When he was but two strides away, Vance stepped out into his path. The razor-sharp knife was in his hand.

"It's me, Lanford," he grated. "It looks like this is the finish for one of us."

There was no word spoken by the big man as he brandished his knife. The two lunged toward each other like great beasts. There was a ringing sound as the blades met in mid-air. Vance knew for certain now that somebody could not fail to hear the sounds of the combat. Silently he prayed for the coming of dawn.

Once more Lanford's huge arm lashed out and Vance parried the thrust. The knife blade missed his cheek by inches. With his free arm he grasped the knife hand of Nolan Lanford. They clenched together.

Vance realized that he couldn't let this battle be made into a drawn out affair. If it wasn't over in a few seconds time his whole cause would be lost. Even now the voice of one of the guards fell on his ears.

With a violent wrenching motion he twisted himself free. He lunged in again, hoping to draw his opponent's guard away. He jabbed out with his blade and at the same time, Lanford made a savage upthrust. Vance felt a fierce stinging pain across his whole left side and he felt the warm blood wash his flesh.

This added to his fury and he made another savage lunge. He felt his knife strike flesh and bone and he heard a dull crunching sound. The knife went in to the hilt.

The big renegade staggered for a moment. His knife dropped from nerveless fingers and a moment later he toppled to the ground. Vance knelt and drew the blade from the man's broad chest.

He raised up and he saw that Mary was trembling. It had been a gruesome sight to see man's primitive passions unleashed upon each other like beasts of a savage wilderness. But the brave young girl hadn't cried out once.

He started toward her and as he did so, a cry of frenzied voices cut through the night air. They came at first from the center of the compound and then they were taken up on all sides. They were trapped.

He took Mary's arm and darted to a dark space between two buildings. They could escape detection there for a few moments at least. Each second he delayed their being found might make greater the chance of reprieve. He threw a passing look to the eastward. A faint streak of gray showed itself there.

And as Vance's eyes held to that streak of light a deathlike stillness fell on the outlaw camp. It was only for a second's duration but it seemed like minutes. The silence was followed by an eerie, drawn-out shriek. It rose in pitch and then broke into weird, unearthly whoops. It was the war-cry that unleashed a painted and savage horde upon the unsuspecting renegade camp.

From all sides they came. The staccato bark of rifle fire rang through the dawn. Arrows whizzed through the air. It was followed by an answering volley of renegade fire and it was mingled with the frightened and anguished cries of the besieged outlaws.

Vance realized in a moment that he must get Mary to shelter. Flying Eagle had told him to get her away from the

camp but they had not been given time. The appearance of Nolan Lanford on the scene had thrown their plans askew.

He pulled her into the door of the nearest cabin while the battle raged on outside. Vance wondered suddenly what had happened to old Jeeb Maloof. Would the oldster be able to withstand the gauntlet of withering gunfire outside.

A harsh laugh at the doorway drew Vance around.

Jules Colette was standing there. His usual easy manner was gone and his sharp features were contorted in a snarl. A cap and ball pistol was in his hand.

"You put one over on me, didn't you?" he shricked in a high-pitched voice. "You and your Indian friends. Well, maybe you got me but I've got you now. You would have been smart to have told me where the fur cache was located."

"All right, Colette," Vance ground out. "Go ahead and get it over with. I take it you're going to kill me."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do, Mister Vance Meredith," said Colette coldly. "I'm going—"

His words trailed off into a squawk. There was a crunching sound of an object striking flesh and Jules Colette sank to the ground where he stood. A moment later a whiskered face thrust itself into the door.

"Jeeb!" cried Vance happily. "You old son-of-a-gun."

THE oldster walked into the opening. A stone tomahawk was in his hand.

"Couldn't no Injun livin' done any better'n that," he crackled. "An' just in time, too, or my name ain't Jeeb Maloof."

The sounds of the conflict outside had now risen to a crescendo and of a sudden it broke into cries of men fleeing into the forests. The rifle fire died into almost silence.

"There goes your outlaws," said old Jeeb suddenly.

"And for good, too," said Vance. "It'll be a long time before there's another man like Colette with the leadership to hold such a powerful gang of cutthroats together." He paused and became thoughtful and then his lips set into a harsh line. "We cleaned them out," he said hoarsely. "But too late to save Fort Marietta"—he turned his face to the North—"and them."

Mary Farley went to his side. "We did it too late to save them," she said softly. "But Fort Marietta shall rise again. Your father would want it and mine, too. They would want us to carry on where they left off. That's what we'll do, Vance. You and I."

Vance dropped his eyes down to meet hers. "You're right, Mary," he said. "That's what we will do. Fort Marietta will rise again and to even greater heights than before. It will be a monument to the courage of those men of the wilderness."

Old Jeeb Maloof shuffled across the room. Vance and Mary turned toward him.

"Well, younkers," he crackled. "Looks like I'm out of place here an' I just happened tuh think that my throat has been dry a long time for a snort of keel-aged rum. An' by jeepers it looks like I'm goin' tuh have tuh start hangin' around Fort Marietta some uh these days tuh teach a lot of little Merediths tuh trap beavers. An' lift h'ar like the Injuns do."

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The Devil Is a Back-Shooter

by ALLAN K. ECHOLS

To save the Potter spread from a cold-decked tinhorn's ruination play, Speed Stout bought into a game with hotlead chips that snared him in a six-gun jackpot!

IT was almost sunset when Speed Stout rode up to the Potter corrals. Instead of going to the bunkhouse where he belonged he went up to the white rambling house where Mrs. Potter lived with her son. Speed swallowed hard when the motherly, white-haired old lady invited him in.

"I've just made some apple pies," she said. "I knew you and Tommy—"

"Has Tom come back from town yet?" Speed asked with a controlled voice.

The old lady's intuition caused her to look at the young foreman sharply. "Why, no. What's the matter?"

"Nothin', ma'am," Speed lied. "I reckon he'll be along."

"You didn't have any trouble on the drive? Did the buyer do all right?" A touch of anxiety toned the motherly woman's questions. "I got a notice from the bank today."

"Sure, everything's all right, Mrs. Potter. We got the stuff to town without losin' a head. Tommy got twelve thousand for the herd. I reckon here he comes now," he added.

Speed was as much relieved as the old lady was when they heard the clatter of horses' hooves in front of the house.

"Wonder who's with him?" Mrs. Potter asked, as she went to the front door.

Speed started to let himself out the back door and make tracks for the bunkhouse when he heard a voice in the front which froze him in his tracks. He knew who was with the youth.

Instead of leaving, Speed hitched up

his gun and went into the front room to face the newcomers. His heart was pounding and his right arm hung loosely beside his holster. He had hoped to spare Mrs. Potter a scene, but there was no way out now.

Mrs. Potter had her hand up to her temple as she watched the entrance of her young son and her neighbor. Speed saw the grief written in her face and he would have given his right eye to have stopped it.

Tom Potter had just become old enough to vote. He was a fine, upstanding image of his dead father. But now he was not able to stand up without the aid of the neighbor, who had made his own drive to the railroad with the Potter stuff.

Buck Thrasher supported the youth by wrapping one of Tom's arms around his neck and by holding him up by his belt. In that manner, he led the youth to a chair and dropped him in it.

Tommy Potter was blind drunk.

The youth slumped in the chair and nursed his right arm. It was wrapped in a blue bandanna handkerchief with blood seeping out of it. The youth mumbled a request for a drink.

Mrs. Potter ran to the kitchen and returned with a cup of water. The youth pushed it away, spilling it on the floor and demanded whiskey.

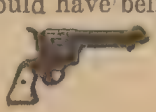
Buck Thrasher said, "I'm sorry ma'am. I tried to keep him from it."

Mrs. Potter looked at him gratefully, trying hard to keep back the tears in her eyes. "Thank you," she said. "What happened to his hand?"

Tommy Potter nursed his bandaged arm solicitously. He tried to focus his reeling eyes on Speed Stout. "That dirty coyote—" He pointed a wavering finger in the general direction of Speed. "That slinkin'—"

Thrasher glanced hastily at Speed and said, "Speed and Tommy had some words—t'aint nothin' serious."

The white-haired woman dropped the water cup as though she had been hit across the face. She looked at her foreman with a mute appeal. There was disbelief written on her seamed face, and Speed knew that if he had denied the charge she would have believed him.



SPEED couldn't stand the sight of that hurt look on her face, and it was out of the question to lie to her. There came a long moment of painful silence. Then the woman came over to where Speed was standing and looked him in the face.

"Speed, you didn't shoot Tommy, did you? I—"

Speed took a deep breath to see if it wouldn't stop the pain in him, but it didn't do any good, the hurt was still there.

He said jerkily, "They're not telling you all of it, ma'am. He's just scratched, anyway."

The woman was incredulous. "But you did shoot him?"

"It was this way, ma'am—"

"You shot him?"

"Yes'm."

The widow spoke in a voice which was hollow with pain. "You shot him while he was—in this condition—and you know you could outshoot anybody in the valley even if they were sober. That name of 'Speed' is a curse on you—"

She could not hold back her tears any longer, and she took off her glasses and cried into her cook apron. Her shoulders shook with her weeping, as though she had heard a son admit some great crime. Then she went over and smoothed out her son's rumpled hair. Her back was toward Speed.

The young foreman of the Potter ranch felt his world sinking beneath his feet. This place was the only home he had ever known, and he had been loyal to it and to the Potters ever since old man Potter had given him a job ten years before. And when the old man had been shot in the back a few years ago, while Tommy had been too young to take responsibility he had run things. He had been like a son to Mrs. Potter, and Tommy had been like a younger brother, headstrong and wild, but a fairly good boy, eager to take over the duties of the place, and appreciative of what Speed had done for the two of them. And now his home was crashing down around his ears.

Speed felt dizzy and hurt, but he could not sneak out of the room without another effort. He went over and stood beside the woman, but spoke to Tommy.

"Listen here, kid," he started. "I want you to get some sense in your head for a minute—"

The youth interrupted him. "Get off'n this ranch and stay off. I'll take care o' you later—if you don't shoot me in the back first."

Speed saw there was no use in trying to talk to the headstrong kid while he was in this condition. He crossed the room and faced Buck Thrasher. The neighboring rancher turned his back and looked out the window, his hands clasped behind him.

Speed surveyed the condemning, broad back for a moment, then said,

"Thrasher, this is your doin's, an' I'm warnin' you to stop it, pronto. What made you bring the kid home in this condition? So she could see him?"

Thrasher was a big man and he turned slowly and looked at Speed with a superior contempt. "I happen to be a friend of theirs," he said pointedly. "And home is the best place for him."

"It would be—if you wasn't with him," Speed said. "And it would suit me just as well if you would forget my warnin'—which still stands."

Speed jammed his hat on his head and took one last look around the room. Tommy had his head in his hands. Mrs. Potter did not look back at Speed. Thrasher watched his every move.

Speed walked out in a dead silence.

NOBODY paid any attention to Speed as he entered Hargrove's Saloon an hour later. Nobody ever paid much attention to him in town because he was not very spectacular. He was just an ordinary cowhand who was quiet and minded his own business and rarely had anything to say. Nobody noticed any difference in the way he walked in and ordered his drink while he looked around the room.

There were only a couple of customers at the bar and six more over in the corner at the poker table. Hargrave, himself, was back of the bar, and Limpy, the hunchback swamper, was using a mop on the floor at the end of the bar.

The cripple was a maverick who had drifted in and who did all the dirty work around the place. Hargrave paid him with a place to sleep back in the storage room and with a generous supply of kicks on his warped, underfed body. The red-headed kid's hungry, freckled face lit up when he saw the only person who had ever treated him kindly. "Hi-ya, Speed," he grinned.

"Hello, Limpy. Come take a walk with me. I want to make some talk with you."

The hunchback dropped his mop and started out from back of the bar. The massive Hargrave laid his cigar down carefully and caught the kid by the mop of his red hair.

"Pick up that mop and git back to work," he barked.

The cripple looked frightened. He glanced at Speed inquiringly.

Speed said, "You won't be wantin' this job any more, if Hargrave is gonna act like that. Come on. I'll take care of you."

The kid jerked loose from Hargrave's grip and darted out of reach. "Whatever you say, Speed," he said.

Hargrave's face suddenly went hard with suspicion. He studied Speed sharply as he asked, "Say, just what's yore sudden interest in that kid, anyway? If you got any talk to make, made it to me. I run this joint."

Speed leaned over the bar and answered, "For the time bein' you run it. But get this. I'm only sayin' it once. If you and Thrasher have got any idea that you'll soon be runnin' the Potter ranch, you're plumb locoed. You won't even be able to run this crooked dive of yours—unless you can do it from boot-hill. This is just to let you know that I'm dealin' myself into this game, an' my chips are all lead."

He saw cold fury light up Hargrave's face, then he turned his back and walked toward the swinging doors, without looking back. Hargrave stared at the broad back of the puncher for a moment, his hand went toward an open drawer in the backbar where a gun lay. Then he changed his mind and watched Speed go out into the night, followed by the limping boy.

Outside, Speed asked the boy, "I want you to tell me what happened in that poker game Thrasher and Hargrave got Tommy Potter into this afternoon. You served their drinks back in Hargrave's private office, didn't you?"

"Sure, Speed, I'll tell you the whole works, and more, too. I'm that glad to get away from that big thievin' hombre an' go with somebody that treats me like I was a human bein' instead of a dog. An' say, Speed, reckon will I git to taste

one o' them apple pies you was tellin' me about Maw Potter makin'? Real, shore-enough pie?"

Speed looked down at the eager, deformed boy. "I hope so," he said, "but we got a lot to do first."

It was an hour later that Speed pulled his horse up before the Potter ranchhouse and he and Limpy slid off him. Mrs. Potter's face was seamed and her eyes were red from crying when she came to the door. She caught her breath when she saw Speed, and she did not ask him in.

Speed said, "Mrs. Potter, you got to listen to me, for your sake and for Tommy's. I want you to hear this kid's story."

HE pushed the timid youth in before him and went into the living room. Mrs. Potter sat in her rocking chair wearily. Speed stood before her.

"I didn't want to make you feel bad before," he said. "But there ain't any other way now. Here's what happened when we got the stock turned over to the buyer's men. Thrasher and Hargrave, who runs the saloon, got Tommy to drinking and got him into a poker game in Hargrave's private office. I tried to stop it before it started, but they kept tauntin' Tommy about me bein' his guardian' and the like, callin' him a baby who couldn't take care of himself, till Tommy got sore at me.

"I tried to get that money from the cattle buyer away from him, knowin' how you needed it to pay the bank, but he was sore and wouldn't let me keep it for him after they told him he needed a nursin' bottle, an' talk like that. They knew I wouldn't let him sit in the game with twelve thousand in his pocket an' bein' drunk besides.

"I reckon I got too much concerned about what's now his business, an' I tried to take the money away from him by force. With Thrasher an' Hargrave still tauntin' him, Tommy kinda lost his head and tried to shoot me. I had to shoot his gun out of his hand to keep him from killin' me.

"With that, Hargrave calls the sheriff and he takes me to his office and puts me under a peace bond not to make any more trouble. By the time I got back to the saloon with the sheriff Tommy and Thrasher and Hargrave was playin' and I couldn't bust in on their private game without the sheriff throwin' me in jail for keeps, an' I couldn't do much good lyin' in jail. But all I was tryin' to do, Mrs. Potter, was to save Tommy from losin' that money. I know you have to pay the bank, and everybody knows Hargrave is crooked, even if they can't prove it. But now I got proof."

The ranch mother was listening to Speed's story with an expression of apprehension on her face that hurt Speed down deep inside, but he had to go on with it now. There was no turning back.

"Do you mean that Tommy gambled away all that money?" she asked unbelievingly. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I didn't know then whether he had lost it all or not. I didn't see the game, but Limpy here was in and out of Hargrave's office, serving them drinks. Limpy'll tell you."

It was clear to Speed that every word the woman heard was like a knife being stuck in her, but he said, "Limpy, tell her what you told me."

The small hunchback twisted his hat in his hand for an embarrassed moment, then looked at Speed. Then, at a grave nod from Speed, he said:

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but nobody ain't got a chance with Hargrave. When he gets new decks of cards he takes 'em out of their packages and marks 'em, and then seals 'em up again. I reckon Tommy thought he was playin' with new cards all the time, but he didn't have a chance."

"Then he lost—all that money."

"Yes, ma'am. If he'd gave it to Speed like Speed wanted him to—"

"It's too late for that now," Speed interrupted. "But here's the point, Mrs. Potter. Limpy heard them tell Tommy they'd give him a chance to get it back tonight. They're goin' to risk that twelve thousand against the ranch—if he would put up the deed—"

Mrs. Potter got to her feet slowly, "You mean he intends to gamble the ranch away as well?"

"He don't intend to lose the ranch, but that's what it will amount to if we don't stop him—"

Mrs. Potter said, "I can't believe it. He's in his father's room asleep—"

On a sudden inspiration Speed said, "I bet Thrasher brought him home so he

could get that deed. You-all kept it in that desk in his room. You better see if he's still in there."

Mrs. Potter opened a door and disappered into another room, then she quickly came out again. She was holding a black metal box which was open, and empty. Mutely she showed it to Speed and said:

"The window's open and he's gone."

Speed turned to the boy, "You're sure you heard Thrasher say they'd play at his house tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Then you stay here and look after Mrs. Potter. And Mrs. Potter, don't you worry about Tommy losin' the ranch. I'm gonna sit in on that game. You-all stay here till I come back."

He jammed his hat on his head and ran out the door and vaulted to his saddle.

Speed pulled his horse up to within a hundred yards of Buck Thrasher's ranchhouse, then dismounted and went the rest of the way on foot. The rambling structure was a black splotch except for the dim yellow light that shone from one window. Speed slipped through the darkness alongside the house until he stood outside the window.

HE peered into the kitchen and saw the three men he was looking for. Thrasher and Hargrave and Tommy were sitting around a pine table playing poker. There were tin cups on the table and a whiskey bottle sat in front of the reeling youth. But the most important thing that Speed saw was a thick fold of papers covered with a heavy blue binding, folded and encircled by a rubber band. It lay on a loose white paper filled with printing and handwriting.

Speed cursed. That was the deed to the Potter ranch, covering Tommy's I. O. U.'s as he filled them out.

Across from Tommy, the other two men had stacks of bills and chips in front of them. The money Tommy had lost earlier in the day, laid out before him to tempt him to try to get it back, backing his efforts with the deed to his and his mother's ranch.

The question of Speed's right to interfere did not occur to him. He was only concerned that Tommy and his mother were in serious trouble and he was the only one who could get them out of it. His rage at the men who were taking the youth over mounted as he watched them taking in the chips at every hand.

Speed took his gun out of his holster and spun the cylinder, then went around to the back door and kicked it open. He was in the room with the door closed behind him before the surprised men recognized him.

His voice was cold and commanding, "All right," he said. "The game's over —and Tommy wins. Kid, pick up everything on the table. We're leaving here *right now.*"

His gun covered the three of them to enforce his demands.

Buck Thrasher's big face was turned toward the newcomer in momentary surprise, then his look was as expressionless as that of Hargrave, the professional gambler. He looked at Hargrave for a cue.

Hargrave got up from the table with the air of one accepting the inevitable. His hands stayed away from his own guns.

"All right," he said quietly. "Tommy, yore wet nurse says you gotta go home and be tucked in bed. Better go along like a good little bottle-fed dogie."

As Speed watched Hargrave, Buck Thrasher's big hand covered the stack of bills in front of him. Speed's gun covered him.

"Take your hand off that," he snapped. "That belongs to the kid."

"No it don't. We won this from him —fair and square."

"You won it—but not fair and square. Tommy, pick it up."

Hargrave looked significantly at Thrasher and said:

"Le's call it a night. This nurse won't let the kid play any more."

Thrasher seemed to get the idea, and left the table—across the room from the direction Hargrave had taken.

Speed saw what they were doing—fanning out to whipsaw him. And taunting the kid to start the battle again.

Their scheme worked. Tommy's eyes, half-closed with the effects of the liquor, seemed to narrow angrily, and he looked waveringly at Speed.

"I told you to let me alone," he muttered.

"—and got shot for your trouble," Thrasher said. "I imagined you'd be scared to disobey yore nurse after that."

"Who's scared?" Tommy demanded

belligerently. "I told you, Speed, that I'd kill you if you interfered with me again, and I'm gonna do it."

He tugged at the gun in his belt, finally got it out and tried to draw a wavering bead on Speed.

As he did so, Speed's gun barked twice and Speed jumped to the side. At the first shot, Thrasher yelled and clutched his punctured belly. Speed's bullet had intercepted him in the act of triggering his own weapon under cover of Tommy's clumsy draw.

SPEED'S second bullet bored squarely into the forehead of Hargrave. The gambler's face showed a sudden blank surprise, then relaxed as he toppled forward, dead on his feet.

None of Speed's bullets were aimed at Tommy.

As Thrasher hit the floor, Speed kicked over the table. Thrasher's body lay prone on the floor. His extended gun arm stiffened and he triggered the weapon once more. The room went dark.

The bullet caught Speed through the left shoulder and the force of it sent him spinning to the floor. He landed on his back, rolled over instantly. His arm shot out just in time to catch Thrasher's weapon and divert the barrel as Thrasher triggered again.

In the darkness, Thrasher was writhing and cursing like a madman, using his great strength to twist his arm out of Speed's grip and turn the weapon on him.

Speed got a lock on Thrasher's wrist and gave it a sudden twist just as Thrasher pulled the trigger. The gun flashed and roared in Speed's face, and then Thrasher's body relaxed.

His own gun had killed him.

Speed got to his feet and struck a match. The three men lay on the floor, two of them dead.

Tommy Potter was sleeping, his head lying on the papers that had fallen from the overturned poker table.

As Speed lit a lamp he heard the sound of hooves and wheels as a buckboard pulled up to the house. Mrs. Potter came in, followed by the limping redhead.

Mrs. Potter had a shotgun under her arm.

She surveyed the kitchen, her eyes taking in the dead men and then coming to rest on her son.

"Just sleeping," Speed said to her. "And sleep will do him good. The money they got from him this afternoon is mixed up with them poker chips on the floor. These marked cards will convince the sheriff that it rightfully should go back to you folks, I reckon, Mrs. Potter."

The ranch mother stood her shotgun up in the corner. "Thank God, I won't have to use this on a human being," she said.

Speed grinned at her. "But you would have," he said. Then he became more serious, and looked at the cripple. "Well, Limpy, I reckon we'll be goin'. Our work's done."

"No it's not," Mrs. Potter said sternly. "Speed Stout, you're going right back to the Potter ranch where you belong, and we'll take care of this boy, too. Tommy may be grown, but it still takes you and me to keep an eye on him. He'll admit that when he wakes up."

She looked at the homeless waif and said, "I don't know how to thank you and Speed for what you've done—"

"I'll call it square for a piece of that apple pie," Speed said. "How about you, Limpy?"

"I shore would," the kid grinned.

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Gunfighter Wanted

DRAMATIC FEATURE-LENGTH TRAIL-DRIVE NOVEL

by NELS LEROY JORGENSEN

Author of "Trial by Trigger," etc.

There was battle lust in the eyes of those two gents, raw savagery, for though Dan Ransome and Rafael Garcia had ridden with every gun-famous renegade along the brimstone, they still weren't going to watch vicious rustlers dictate the destiny of Quicapos, Dan's home range!

As Dan spun about, Corliss fired twice

DAN RANSOME pulled his pony to a halt, squinted his eyes. His companion, Rafael Garcia, a Mexican, lean and dark almost to the point of blackness, paced his cayuse to the summit of the slight rise, and drew up beside him. Dan Ransome said:

"See what I see, Rafael?"

Ransome was very tall and rangy; his

face was dark as tanned leather, lean. By contrast, the blue eyes set in that face had the appearance of ice. Garcia looked.

Below them was a kind of bowl, rich with sage and knee-high gramma grass. Beyond, the hills were heavy with verdure: good cattle country. They saw, however, a bunch of about thirty longhorns milling in the center of the bowl in a surprising manner.

That was the first thing they could see; and it was what had aroused Ransome's attention. The next thing that caught their gaze was the reason for the excitement of the beasts. Two riders were cutting in and around them, swinging riatas; and from where he sat his mount, Dan could hear six-guns pop.

It was obvious that the two riders were trying to get the small herd into a run.

Handsome's face looked puzzled. He said to his companion: "Look here, Rafael, those steers are Circle-C steers. And this here is Circle-C land. Why, those hombres must be raidin' 'em!"

His companion grunted, shrugged. Raiders, to him, that shrug seemed to say, were of no moment. But he looked at Ransome.

Ransome, however, at just that moment, had seen another figure. It came on a paint pony and was spurring toward the mix-up. As they watched, they could see a puff of smoke blurt out from the lone horseman. Horse*man*? . . . It was Rafael Garcia who exclaimed:

"*Dios amigo!* That lone one—that is a woman!"

Ransome, too, had seen. The knowledge changed his whole face. He said in a low voice:

"Yo're right, Rafael, a woman. And I'm makin' a bet who it is. Never mind what we crossed the Border for—right now, we're helpin' that gal out. Those hombres down there are raiders, and this is Circle-C land . . . and that gal—that's Lucia Calvert; It's her pa owns the Circle-C! *Vamosnos!*"

There was a light in the Mexican's eyes, quite a different light from that in Dan Ransome's the tall Texan. It was as though something savage in Rafael Garcia welcomed battle. More preferably battle in which he was involved with his friend.

They rode.

Down the long, undulating slope they spurred. The participants in the scene at the base of the bowl had not as yet seen them. The girl was still giving chase, and the raiders were yelling, bellowing and popping their guns at the heels of the longhorns they had got in motion. They were turning the cattle south.

Closer the two men from below the Border drew. Then, with a low oath, Garcia flung up one of the twin .44s in his ornate holsters, aid riding with his knees to guide the wiry pony under him, rested the gun across his left arm and fired. Fired twice.

The raiders turned to see from which direction these shots had come. They saw the two horsemen spurring toward them: two business-like men on powerful mounts, and riding as though they meant trouble, as though they welcomed it.

One of the raiders fired. The shot flew wide, but it encouraged a second. That also flew wide. And the two men from below the Border kept on. The girl on the pony shouted something that no one could hear, urged her mount forward.

Then Ransome's gun began to bark. He was close enough now for some degree of accuracy in his shooting. The forty-four ripped out three times; one of the raiders' ponies gave a startled scream, reared, then bolted off at a mad tangent.

Still the two rode down.

Confusion gripped the men who had been driving the longhorns, they had a moment of indecision. Then, abruptly, the three of them pulled out from the dust cloud, and were streaking off toward the edge of the bowl.

RANSOME and Garcia pounded on. There was battle lust in the eyes of both men, raw savagery. But across their path cut the girl who had started the pursuit. They reined in as the three mounts came to the apex of a triangle.

The girl began: "I don't know who you are, but those men were—"

She hesitated. Ransome's hard face broke into a smile that was not entirely a happy smile. He threw off his hat.

"Reckon yuh ought to know me, Miss Lucia," he said. "Only maybe it's that yuh don't want to."

She stared. Her eyes were wide. They were a deep blue, those eyes, and at the moment, far in their depths, there was

something of violet in them. She sat her horse slim and straight, and stared in wondering disbelief. Rafael was staring, too. Rafael Garcia's black eyes were taking in the slim, patrician loveliness of her—her bronze hair, rebelling from under her sombrero's brim; her red, full mouth; the creamy, soft tawiness of her flesh where the pulse beat gently in her throat at her opened collar.

She stammered: "Dan . . . Ransome!"

"Yes," he said. "Dan Ransome. Back from below the Border. And—Miss Calvert—my *compadre*, Rafael Garcia."

Rafael bowed, sweeping off his sombrero. The girl looked at him, smiled, murmured something. Then she seemed to freeze.

"Of course I must thank you," she said. She seemed at a loss. The raiders had disappeared. She added: "You must have seen. But do you know, have you any idea, who those men were?"

Ransome shook his head. "Not at all. Mexes?"

"One of them was. I couldn't identify them. But I know—know even though I can't prove it—that they're in the employ of your uncle, Bartholomew Ransome, of the Diamond-R!"

"The Diamond-R?" Dan repeated, bewildered. "But that is my father's ranch—"

She flashed a look at him. "Your father, Dan Ransome, is dead. I thought," she added, "that was why you came back, from your—exile."

The lines in his face had tightened and gone ash white. And then a moment later he said: "No, that was not why I came back." He abruptly added, in flat tones, as though to himself: "Then that'll make me the owner of the Diamond-R."

She seemed puzzled at his attitude and words. "I suppose you were your father's heir, yes," she said quietly. "But you ran away, after that—that killing . . ."

He nodded vaguely. "That's so, I did, didn't I? But, Lucia—" and his voice held now another note—"I wonder if you believe I killed Mark Seeley."

She flushed. "Does it matter?"

His eyes were clouded. He said: "It used to matter, a lot, what you thought of me. Sometimes I almost thought that you wanted me to believe that you cared what I turned out to be. That's why I tried so hard to be good, time an' time again."

Lucia Calvert dropped her eyes. "You left—about then, Dan. Left with the brand of a killer. I—if you've asked me—no, I never believed you killed Mark Seeley. In the dark, on the road? No, Dan, no. You might well have killed him on another occasion in one of your tempers, and everyone knew you hated him enough—but you wouldn't wait for him along a trail, and—and shoot him out of his saddle!"

Dan was watching her. Quietly he said: "Thank you, Lucia. I'm glad you understand—that."

"But they still want you for—for questioning, anyway!" the girl exclaimed. "Your running away, after you'd threatened Seeley, was—"

"Plumb necessary," he told her. "And I just took leave from my—my business below the Border, to come up here an' straighten that out."

She said: "Where have you been?"

His gaze met hers steadily. "With Montana."

She caught her breath. "Montana?" she cried. "Montana, the raider? Dan, do you realize that—that the whole country is certain that the rustling that's been going on in these hills is at Montana's instigation? . . . that they say he's been buying up all he can get, and supplying it to these wandering bandit gangs?"

His eyes were steady. "I don't think so much of Pablo Montana," he said. "But Rafael and I have been with him. He's been plumb bad. So have we. But Montana never crossed the Border on a raid, nor did he receive stock that'd been rustled across. Mind yuh, I know him, and I know how bad he is. But he's got just one weak point, if yuh can call it that. Montana's mother was a Texan. He hated Americanos, but he won't fight 'em, or harm 'em, on that account—unless, o' course, they get in his way."

THE girl seemed trying to make out the context of this man. Remembered scenes flashed through her mind. Her cheek flushed a little at thought of one October night, long ago. If he only had not been so wild. . . . But she remembered, too, other things. More sinister things. Looking up, she said:

"Anyway, Dan, I can only thank you,

and your friend, for helping me. And tell you it's not safe for you in this Quicapos country. They want you. No matter who did that killing, if they get you, you'll pay for it. Go back—back below the Line—"

"Where I belong!" he finished, bitterly.

But he shook his head.

"I came up here to straighten some things out," he said. "Meetin' yuh, this way, sorta fits in. Rustlin', yuh say—and my uncle now rides the ranch that's mine by rights."

He stopped. She waited for him to continue.

"Lucia," he went on; "try and trust me, and Rafael. Take us back to yore old man. Rafael and me—we'd plumb like jobs on the Circle-C for awhile."

"What?"

Firmly he said. "Jest that. We maybe could help you out a bit, and maybe get what we come up here to find."

"What did you come here to find?"

"A confession—from the man who killed Mark Seeley from ambush."

Her eyes met his. He could not read them. But there was the beginning of a curious smile on her lips, when she said:

"All right, Dan. If Dad says yes, you'll get the job. But I doubt if he'll say yes."

Garcia shrugged. Dan's face became grave. The two men helped Lucia haze the herd of longhorns back toward the house buildings. They settled them in a draw for the night, then rode on.

CHAPTER II

GREGG CALVERT was at the corrals when the trio rode up. He was talking with another man. He regarded the approaching riders curiously. Lucia swung down from her horse and pulled her father a little distance away. The man thus left alone stood staring at Ransome and Garcia.

He was a tall, thin man, with a broken nose. He wore a floppy sombrero and it was pushed back. His mouth drew downward at the corners, and his eyes had a look as of eternal suspiciousness.

Ransome rolled a cigarette with nonchalance, passed the tobacco and papers to his companion. Rafael accepted them, darting a quick glance at the man in front of them. He said nothing, only passed the makings back after he had used some.

Dan Ransome pushed the stuff back into his pocket and inhaled as Lucia Calvert turned back to them. Gregg Calvert was at her side, a tall, bulky man with a square jaw and a definitely straight slit for his mouth. He had gray eyes, and the eyes showed no expression as he came up.

Calvert said: "Yeah, I reckon yuh are Dan Ransome, ain't yuh?" He was peering into Dan's face, and his voice was low.

Dan nodded and said: "And this here's my compadre, Rafael Garcia." He added, smiling a little: "I won't have to tell yuh that we're both known as plumb bad."

Calvert snorted; but he had excellent control of his rocklike features. "I reckon those who know didn't lie much," he said. "And Lucia tells me yuh want a job here, both of yuh."

Ransome inclined his head. "That's right. Both of us."

"Why?"

Dan shrugged. "From what I hear, maybe yuh need a couple o' top-hands who can shoot an' fight. That's us. And—well, it's more than that, Mister Calvert. I came back into this Quicapos country to do a job. I'm goin' to do it, or die tryin'—and I don't think my number's on any lead pieces jest yet. If yuh need hands, like I said, I don't mind sayin' that it'd fit in with our ideas."

"And them ideas—?"

Lan looked at Lucia. "I told her," he said.

Calvert grunted. "Huh! Yuh aim yuh can prove yo're as white as snow?" he asked, with a skeptical smile.

"No. 'Cause I'm not. Never was. But it's a long ride from bein' white as snow, and shootin' a man from ambush—even if yuh do hate the man! You got nothin' to do with all this, Calvert; I'm takin' my own chances. If yuh figger that me and Rafael can be a help on yore range, then sign us up. Pay's not important."

Calvert looked toward the lone man with whom he had been talking when his daughter rode up with the visitors. "Come here, Pete," he said. Then, as

the man strode over, "Pete Oliver, my range boss. D'yuh reckon, Pete, that we could take these two rannies on?"

Pete Oliver had not been near enough, quite, to hear the preceding conversation. Now he looked at the two, and said:

"Mebbe. We need guns, no use denyin' it. These hombres carry two apiece. Can they use 'em?"

"We have," purred Rafael Garcia.

OLIVER shot him a look. Ransome was looking at Lucia, wondering what she had said to her father. Oliver said:

"What's their names?"

Hastily, Dan said: "Jes' Dan an' Rafael'll do. If yuh don't like Mex, call my compadre Ralph, or Rafe."

Oliver grunted. "All right, boss."

Dan said to Calvert: "Are we hired?"

"Yeah, I reckon. Oliver'll show yuh where t' bunk."

Calvert turned away with his daughter. Lucia shot a glance over her shoulder, and Dan Ransome thrilled to it.

He and Rafael dismounted, and they were led by the foreman to the bunkhouse. There they flung their saddle duffle and twin saddle-bags. Oliver explained that they were short-handed; there were only two other riders, he said. Shorty and Lefty, brothers under the name of Glynn, from Arkansas. They were out on the range now, working behind the hogback ridge that led toward the canyon where the base of the mountains fell.

In the bunkhouse, Pete Oliver lingered at the door. His small eyes were on Dan. Finaly, he murmured:

"Dan. . . . There was a Dan Ransome in these parts, year or two back. Are yuh a Ransome?"

Dan's eyes, frosty, met his, as he straightened from spreading out his blankets. "No," he said coldly; "why?"

Oliver shifted, shrugged. "Nothin' much," he said. "Only the Ransomes ain't liked much here. Didn't Miss Lucia tell yuh that we suspicioned Bart Ransome was back of all this raidin'?"

"She said something about it. If it was old Martin Ransome, I'd 'a taken exception. But she tells me my—Mart is dead. Bart Ransome, I'm willin' to believe anything of. That all?"

"Yeah. Reckon so. Yore jobs here, I'm warnin' yuh, ain't goin' to be too easy. When yo're ready, we'll ride out an' I'll show yuh the spread."

DAN RANSOME, however, could see that Pete Oliver was no friend; and he confessed to himself a dislike of the man in return. He didn't like his eyes, for one thing. And that matter of the names . . . he might or might not have aroused Oliver's suspicions.

But in this part of the world, it was not good etiquette to be too particular about a man's name, anyway. Oliver was, by comparison, a newcomer to this countryside; consequently, he would not be too certain that Dan was the man who had vanished across the Border a year or two back, with the brand of killer on him—killer from the dark.

Lucia was inside the house when they rode out. They crossed the hogback, and slid down to where the Glynn brothers sat their mounts side by side, smoking brown paper cigarettes, wary eyes peeled on the crests of the slopes about them, while a herd of about five hundred steers grazed peacefully below.

Dan and Rafael were introduced. Lefty Glynn was a tall and preternaturally thin waddy, with a long face and soft, dark eyes. His brother had not exactly earned by his physique the cognomen of "Shorty" that he bore; it was to be assumed that it had been fastened upon him because of the contrasts with "Lefty," who looked and was very tall and spare. Shorty was stocky and sandy-haired, with a humorous mouth.

III

FOLLOWED a few days of comparative peace on the range. Dan Ransome made no effort to seek the company of Gregg Calvert's daughter. She, for her part, seemed to feel that she had done sufficient when she had talked her father into taking on the two semi-outlaws as hands. But that they were good hands, nobody could deny.

And, too, it seemed that a sort of security came with them. Neither of the two had gone into Caguas, the little town that was used as a shipping point for the beef from the Quicapos range, but rumors of their arrival from Mexico had reached

town. Shorty and his brother had been in several times; and, on another occasion, Pete Oliver had driven the buckboard in.

Lucia had gone with him to do some personal shopping. Pete had sought the Diamond-Flush bar; but he was waiting for Lucia when she had consummated her purchases. On the way back, he ventured:

"They're askin' about them two new waddies yore daddy took on."

She looked at him. "What did they want to know?"

"Why . . . who they was!"

"How'd they know we had more hands?"

Oliver's answer was somewhat reluctant. "Reckon I must'a mentioned it," he said.

"Why?"

He grimaced. They were rolling along the road back to the ranch. "I dunno. Maybe I was a fool, I guess," he evaded. "But anyhow, I figgered it wouldn't be no harm to let who chooses know that we've got two-gun men a-herdin' Circle-C cows now. . . . What with these rustlers, and all."

Lucia frowned in a long silence, while the buckboard careened over the rough roadway. Finally she said:

"No, I don't suppose it could do any harm. Maybe—whoever's back of the raids—they'll be more careful."

"I reckon that's about what I figgered."

But still she did not seem pleased. They did not speak a lot more on the way back; she appeared to be thinking hard.

When they drew up at the ranch house, Lucia saw Shorty ambling from the corrals, and she asked him to saddle her pony. Shorty complied; he laid the noose over her little paint. Then he saddled.

"Jest aimin' for air, Miss Lucia?"

"Yes. Where are the boys?"

He pointed. "Lefty's over there. That Mex is helpin' him; they're goin' to brand a few strays tomorrow. I reckon yore Dan feller is over past that hogback. That's where most of the herd is right now."

He saw Lucia shart for the direction in which he had first pointed; then, for no apparent reason, she altered her course and struck for the rise which hid the herd.

Dan was not at first in view. Lucia reached the summit of the ridge, and then saw him below. His right knee was hooked over his saddlehorn, and he was using the knee as a resting place for his elbow while fashioning a cigarette. He licked the paper, stuck the cigarette in his mouth, then a match flared. Lucia rode down on him without his being aware of her approach.

"All quiet?" she sang out; and he jerked about.

His eyes watched her approach, smoke eddying through his nostrils. "All quiet," he assented. "Been to town?"

"Yes. I went there with Pete." She drew up. "I think somebody's been talking about the new Circle-C hands. You don't want it known who you are, do you, Dan?"

He hesitated. Then, "No; not yet," he said.

"When?"

"When I get ready. I told yuh I was after something, Miss Lucia."

She nodded, watching him, noting the grim, hard lines of his face, his cold eyes—faraway now, fixed on something distant—the mouth, with its lines of bitterness that were all too plain.

She ventured: "You think, Dan, you'll find what you want . . . around here?"

"It's the only place to look," he said. "Who's ridin' for my—for my uncle?"

"Only about four or five men regularly. But they're all gunfighters, by their looks. He's got a Mexican for his foreman—Ortiz."

"I don't know him. But it's the style I had a hunch about. Importin' gunfighters. That'd be Bart Ransome. Who's sheriff?"

"Ben Corliss. You and he used to be friends, when you were younger."

"Yeah. But I reckon no sheriff's much of a friend to Dan Ransome now . . . not yet!"

They were both silent for a moment. Then the girl said, very softly: "I wonder, Dan—wonder if you'd tell me just what that was all about—the mess you found yourself in. Of course, everyone knew you hated Mark Seeley."

"I certainly did," he said, the expression in his face never changing. "Not sorry they got him, either, whoever it was. And I don't mind yore askin'. I'll tell yuh what I know. Then yuh can believe it or not, as yuh like."

"I think, Dan," Lucia said softly, "that I'm likely to believe it."

"After I've told yuh I was down below there with Montana—all that?"

HER eyes were quite steady. She smiled, and said: "It isn't that, Dan. You were bad—wild. Always were. But you're not the kind of a man who'd lie to save his face . . . or his life."

"That afternoon," he said quietly, "I was plenty drunk, there in the Diamond-Flush. So was a lot of others, by the way. They started poker. Seeley hated me, and I hated him. There were five of us at the table; and I saw Seeley, when it come his deal, make a pass off the bottom of the pack. A stranger there saw it, too; but bein' a stranger, he dropped out o' the game, quiet-like, preferrin' that to trouble. But I didn't. I called Seeley."

He paused. She watched him. He took a deep breath and began again.

"I told Seeley I didn't want the deal, even before I picked up the cards—accused him across the table of crooked play. Seeley got tough about it, the others kept quiet. But right then an' there Seeley should 'a called me, if he'd had the guts of a worm. Well, he didn't. Smiled, dealt over, and passed it off like I was too drunk and he was humorin' me.

"I played out the next hand and lost; then cashed in my chips. When I got up, I stood over Mark Seeley and told him what I'd been thinkin' about him all along. And I added—there come my mistake—that him bein' the snake he was, I was goin' to gun him some night, and I doubted if he'd have the nerve to gun back! It'd have been better if Seeley had called me, then. They could all 'a seen it was fair play. But no." Dan hesitated. "Somebody heard that threat o' mine, and they waited to make it good, that very night!"

Lucia caught her breath. "They found him dead, under his horse, the next morning. But Dan, don't you see that, leaving the way you did, that same morning, it all pointed to you?"

He nodded gravely. "You don't have to tell me that, Lucia," he said. "It jest happened there was an hombre in the bar at that time who heard it all—Rafael Garcia. He was still in town when Seeley's body was found, with holes in it. He heard them yell to get me. Seems this here Rafeal had seen the direction I'd taken. It was a good many miles from where they found Seeley's body. I had fallen off my cayuse, and the hoss's nose was pointed to the Line. This Garcia trailed me and found me in a drunken sleep down among some alders. The bushes were along the creek, and I suppose I'd been tryin' to get a drink. Rafael woke me up an' told me. Told me what they was sayin', back here."

He spun his cigarette away. There was a momentary silence. It seemed that the girl had no comment.

Finally she ventured, somewhat wistfully: "I believe you, Dan. But I wish you had come back, and faced them."

His eyes glittered when he returned: "If I'd been the man I am now, Lucia, I'd have done jest that. But those days, it was another Dan Ransome you knew. I'm sorry; but it's true. I listened to Garcia and went south with him. We've been there—with Montana—ever since."

"And you'd just left Montana to come up here to clear your name when—?"

"When Rafael and I found you in trouble. That's all."

"Is that—all?" she asked, in a small voice.

His eyes smouldered. He saw her bent head, and his eyes became very tender. He said, huskily: "That *was* all, Lucia, when I come back. Since then, I've gained—other ambitions." He added, quickly: "Ambitions which we'd better not talk about now, had we?"

IV

DAN was asleep in the bunkhouse that night when Rafael Garcia came in. Garcia had dismounted and looked at the big silver watch he carried, by the moonlight. It was eleven. He did not unsaddle. He crept into the bunkhouse and reached Dan's shoulder. Shorty was asleep and snoring; Lefty was out riding night herd.

Dan sat up, making no sound. "What?" he breathed.

Garcia's lips, close to his ear, formed: "Dress. Come outside."

Dan needed no urging. He slipped into his jeans, reached for his chaps on the hook above his head, and brought them down with his hat and gun belt. Outside he found Garcia flattened against the bunk-house wall in the shadows.

"I theenk you will want to know," Garcia breathed. "Tonight I am riding alone, over that way." He pointed in the direction that the Diamond-R fenceline lay. Dan nodded. "I see Pete Oliver ride out, an' I theenk he is going to relieve this Lefty Hombre. But no. He rides this other way!" Garcia pointed again.

"There's none of our stock over there!" Dan muttered.

"That is eet!" Garcia crowed in a squeaky voice; and taking Dan by the arm, he led him to the corrals. His voice rose as they departed the vicinity of the bunkhouse. "So I have follow'. Here, saddle. Look, Dan. Thees hombre Oliver he has some meeting in these hill', I tell you. I trail until I see him pull up, then he roll a cigarette, light it. He sits his *caballo* there, an' waits."

Dan was saddling hurriedly. As he and Garcia struck off, he breathed—as though the thought had been all along in his mind— "Waits—for what?"

"That," said Garcia, "is what I thought you might want to see for yourself."

Dan jerked his head in a grim nod of confirmation. They rode along, not on the roadway, but over the more soundless surface of the grazing land. They said nothing more. Dan was content to allow Garcia to lead the way for the present.

They splashed through the beds of two creeks, came up again, and rode across open prairie. A hill mounted ahead of them; it was wooded. Far beyond it lay the barbed-wire fences of the Diamond-R. But not too far. A great part of this country was open range.

They came in to where the bed of a stream had partially dried up. Cottonwoods sheltered it from both sides, and low-hanging alder. Rafael drew up.

"Perhaps we lead our *caballos* from here," he said.

They dismounted. Dan followed his guide, only ankle deep in the sluggish stream, making for the low hill. The hill was wooded at the top, and composed mostly of basalt rock. It lay almost directly in the path of the watercourse they were following; its bulk had apparently turned the stream in the past.

Then Rafael stopped. The moon cast the hill's shadow ahead. "Follow," Rafael said.

Dan followed, cautiously. The Mexican was like a cat in his progress. They wound about the base of the hill; then Garcia eased himself foot by foot along its upward-shelving surface. Once he stopped, flattened. Dan thought he could head voices. When he caught the gleam in Garcia's eyes, he knew he had been right.

On their bellies, they crawled a little further, Dan always inches behind his companion. Then the voices became partially clear. Only at intervals, however. There was a wind blowing, and from the south so, though the words they could catch were coherent, they were distorted and there were gaps in the sentences.

They heard bits of what Oliver was saying: "But suppose it is . . . hombres? Suppose . . . ?"

There were two riders besides Oliver below. One of them muttered something, a low oath. Another growled: ". . . whoever they are, it's none of our business. You failed the last time, Pete—don't fail agin! It ain't healthy. Not with the Ransomes, it ain't!"

Dan flinched. These men were dickering with the Calvert foreman for raiding; he was sure of that. Pete Oliver was his uncle's man on the Calvert range. And the Ransomes! The thought gave Dan Ransome a little shiver.

"How about—?"

A growl interrupted Oliver's voice. A curse. "Ef yo're so sure these hombres is agin our game—you know what t' do about 'em? Or are yuh too yeller-bellied? Want some of our crew t' help yuh? . . . Or will yuh face yore own guns?"

The other man said: "Git 'em—that's all! Ef there's any doubt about 'em, we can't have 'em in the way."

Oliver said something more, but the wind tore at his words. The horses below the two eavesdroppers shifted. A kind of mist made itself felt. Someone muttered: "Likely . . . rain."

Dan's eyes were burning. He gripped Garcia's wrist, jerked his head. They

crept and wriggled backward. With caution, they made their way to the place where they had left their mounts. In the shadow of the cottonwoods, Garcia looked to his friend.

DAN replied to the unspoken question in his eyes, as he swung into the saddle.

"Looks like we heard plenty, eh, *amigo?*"

"*Si.* That Oliver *jibaro!* Now we go to tell Senor Calvert?" Garcia did not look as though he relished the idea.

"Hell, no!" Dan gritted out. "Who'd believe us? Outlaws, under suspicion ourselves! No. This is our job, *compadre.*"

Rafael nodded. "So I theenk," he said. "*Como?*"

"How?" Dan repeated. "Why, Oliver's got to go back to the ranch, ain't he? And his trail runs back along this way, don't it? And we don't know yet jest what their plans are, do we?—except I reckon they're goin' to strike plumb soon. Well, it's up to us to see that Pete Oliver tells us what we want to know."

"And we do the job ourselves, eh? *Bueno!*"

They forced their mounts farther into the shadows. The stream gurgled without enthusiasm around the fetlocks of their mounts. They sat very still. The mist had increased, and now it was softing gently through the broad leaves over their heads.

Then they saw twin sparks ahead—a rider's horse had struck a steel-shod hoof. A moment later, a lone horseman entered the shadow of the stream bed. It was Pete Oliver. Oliver was riding bent forward. He appeared to be concentrating on the making of a cigarette. He had bent over to lick the paper when the voice came out of the dark—

"Reach for the branches, Oliver!"

The cigarette paper spilled tobacco. Oliver's hand began a flashing movement toward his right hip; but it was arrested suddenly. Dark as it was, he could see light gleaming along the blue barrel of a .44.

He obeyed. "What the—?"

"Jest take orders," Ransome said. "Keep reachin'. Rafael, get that gun before Pete gets careless."

Rafael spurred up and neatly lifted the gun from its holster; he stuck it in his own belt. Then Dan rode forward, and Oliver was able to see their faces. He ripped out a foul oath.

"The renegades!"

"That," observed Dan Ransome, "would refer to *three* renegades. We ain't got much talkin' to do, Oliver; so to keep yore mouth shut till we're ready for yuh, I'll tell yuh that Garcia and I listened in on that private confab yuh was havin' back there. But we only heard enough to make us crave more details. Come on!"

Oliver looked scared when the two horses ranged on either side of him. Dan's mount nudged his and forced the way. The trio rode out of the watercourse into the mist that was now deepening.

"Where yuh takin' me?" Oliver ventured. "Back—?"

"No—no! They'd be too nice to yuh back there, and—*quien sabe?*—they might even believe yuh if y' put up a bluff. No—here's where yo're goin'."

Dan caught Oliver's reins and led the way around the base of another basalt cliff, emerging on the south side of it. From this point, in daylight, there was a clear sweep almost to the Border. It was well off the beaten track. A jagged rock stood up as high as the backs of the horses; beyond it, there was a well of blackness.

"Yuh can get down here,' Dan said.

Oliver dismounted, followed by Rafael. Swing to the ground, Dan whipped his gun loose and prodded Oliver's back. "In there!" he commended. Added: "It's not so wet!"

Palpably fearful—of his life, now—Oliver made no protest. He allowed himself to be shoved into the dank darkness. They left the mounts outside, and the two captors followed him in. It was dark as the inside of a tomb.

Oliver could hear Dan fumbling for tobacco and papers. Then a match flared. It lit Dan's face with a devilish, crimson glow. Over the flame of it, Dan said:

"There's a flat rock there, Oliver. Make yoreself comfortable." The match went out.

Oliver could be heard to sink upon the rock. In the entrance to the cavern, Rafael Garcia's body was a crouching blot. Oliver could hear Dan's breathing. Presently the cigarette gave a brighter glow,

and he heard Dan's voice:

"Now, Pete, let's lay our cards down. Rafael and I heard yuh, awhile back. We know yo're Bart Ransome's agent on the Circle-C. We heard enough to know that yuh arranged rustlin's for him before. Enough to know that yo're stagin' another one pronto. That right?"

Pete Oliver's voice came, sullen: "Yuh say yuh heard. Why don't yuh tell Calvert?"

"Because," answered Dan, blowing out smoke, "Calvert wouldn't believe me. That's one thing. Because Rafael and I are known to be tricky and fast, and able to turn tables, when we have to. They'd think you caught us tonight, instead o' the other way around. And—well, yuh savvy the rest. Only," he added, "they're right when they think we're tricky. We are. We'd just admire to learn from you when this raid is goin' to be staged tomorrow night—and who's in it. That may be the second reason—it's our chance for a cleanup!"

Oliver laughed from the dark. "Yuh think I'm a-goin' to tell yuh that?"

Softly, deadly, Dan's voice came. "Yes, Pete, I think yuh are."

THE foreman of the Circle-C gave a shiver. But he managed: "Maybe yuh would gun me, huh? Well, suppose I told yuh? Maybe even I will, since yuh know so much now. What's goin' to make yuh believe I'm tellin' yuh right?"

"This!" returned Dan easily. "We're goin' to leave yuh tied up here—that's first. Then yuh tell us, see? And if yuh tell us wrong, either Rafael or me will get clear and see that yuh don't enjoy much health afterwards. Maybe," went on Dan, in his deadly voice, "the things yuh've been suspectin' about Rafael and me are true. Maybe we did jest leave Montana. I reckon if yuh believe that—and I think yuh do—yuh'll know we don't threaten idle."

Garcia put in: "*Si.* No matter what happen', they do not get both of us. We are prepare' now. One of us will come back, I promise you, Senor Olivaire."

There was a space of silence. Oliver said finally: "Then it's true. You two *were* with Montana!"

Dan said, his voice level: "I was Pablo Montana's *segundo.* He taught me a lot. How to make men talk, for one thing."

There came a quick breath. Oliver's breathing was heavy. "And if I tell yuh, then, what yuh want to know—?"

"Yuh stay tied up in this cave, till it's all over. Afterwards, in exchange, one of us 'll cut yuh loose and let yuh git on yor horse an' head south."

There came a space of silence, as though Pete Oliver were battling within himself. At last he breathed:

"What do yuh want to know?"

"We want to know about tomorrow night."

Oliver growled: "I was to see that you and this Mex was out o' the way. Gun yuh, if I had to. Have Shorty and Lefty off somewhere; one of them ridin' night-herd; anyways, separated."

Dan said: "We'll accept that. And God help yuh, Oliver, if yuh steer us wrong! Now . . . about what time is this party due to break?

"'Bout eleven. Ransome's goin' to have some extra help. He's got men, but—"

"Where's the help?" Dan snapped. "From Montana?"

"No. There's a couple extra guns he can hire—I don't know who they are. Montana's not with us. Not buying the beef we've been runnin' off, either."

Dan breathed a relieved sigh. "I didn't think so," he said. "Bart's probably got some independent agent south o' the Line, is my guess. Anyway, it's cripplin' the ranch that my uncle's up to . . . I don't think he cares so much about cash returns, till he gets to be king o' the Quicapos. That it?"

"I reckon," said Oliver surlily.

"An' when he gets to be king, he can take what he wants. Well, he's gone about it right, so far. Too bad Rafael and I had to come back at jest this time, huh?" Dan laughed a soft laugh.

Out of the gloom, Oliver said: "Yuh can't buck Bart Ransome, even if yuh are of the same breed!"

"Maybe not," said Dan. "Maybe not. But don't say we're the same breed again, or maybe I'll forget I'd said I'd let yuh go free!"

Oliver was silent. Dan's cigarette end glowed. His companions in the cavern watched it, fascinated. Finally, they saw the glow spin out and dash sparks against the wall. Dan's voice:

"Come on, Rafael. Let's tie him up an' leave him. We got things to do."

Rafael sprang to work eagerly. In a few moments, they had left the cavern, mounted, leaving Oliver securely trussed behind them. Dan had spoken no word after the terse command. He and Garcia rode off into the dark together. From time to time, the Mexican shot a glance at him, sidewise, but he could make out nothing.

At last, Rafael said, reluctantly:

"What now, Dan?"

Dan pulled in; the other followed suit. Dan said:

"I been thinkin', Rafael. Tomorrow night, about eleven. We haven't got enough men, even if we are warned. Not for a cleanup. And we're not goin' to count on the sheriff in this. You—you feel like a long ride?"

"Where?"

"To Pablo Montana."

"Montana?"

"Yes. Tell him what we've heard, what we know. Ask Montana to lend yuh half a dozen men. Then ride back here with 'em. We'll fight fire with fire. In other words, bad hombres to wipe out worse 'uns. This range is goin' to be cleaned!"

"Bring Montana's men—here?"

"That's it. For this one job. He'll come."

"I think he will," said Garcia, nodding slowly. "*Si;* I theenk he will. *Carajo!* I go, Dan. I will be back."

He wheeled his pony and shot off into the dark. Dan looked after him musingly then he picked up his reins and trotted on back to the Circle-C bunk house.

V

IT was not until morning, when the affairs of the ranch had begun their routine, that Dan decided it was time to broach his ideas. As a matter of fact, his ideas were not too well formulated, even to himself. In the first place, there was grave doubt that he would be believed.

But in the middle of the morning, he dismounted from his pony and swung up the steps of the ranch-house. Calvert and his daughter were inside. They were in the big living room, and their heads were bent close together over a sort of ledger, where Calvert was tracing numerals with a small pen in his big fist.

Calvert swung around on his entrance. Dan said:

"Excuse me, boss, but what I got to say is plumb important, if yuh got time."

Calvert had been wearing glasses for his figuring; now he removed them. Lucia looked curious.

Gregg Calvert had a puzzled frown in his eyes; but he said: "It's all right, Dan. What's up?"

"Plenty! Among other things, this spread's goin' to stand a raid sometime tonight!"

Both his listeners looked at him blankly. Then Calvert said: "Maybe I don't savvy yuh, Dan. Maybe I do. But we been subject to raids right along, an' I think yuh know where they're comin' from. Besides, where's yore partner? He ain't shown up on ay part o' the spread this morning."

"No," Dan replied. "About now, I should think, he's down talkin' with Pablo Montana."

Then they both stared at him—stared as though they believed him mad. "Montana?" Calvert breathed. "How—why—?"

Lucia was looking at Dan oddly. He shifted. He said: "Maybe it'd be better if I broke it to yuh from the beginning."

"Maybe," assented Calvert, in a dry voice.

They were ready to suspect him, Dan sensed. Perhaps not Lucia; but there was still his owlhoot record. So he told them, word for word, what he and Garcia had discovered the night before, out on the mist-covered range. They listened without interruption, almost with disbelief. When he had finished, Calvert said:

"Why—how come yuh didn't think it was wise—if all this is so, to jest go in an' tell Ben Corliss, the sheriff?"

"Because, Mister Calvert," Dan said, "now is the time to wind up all this rustlin' for good an' all. And we can do it. If that gang come here and found us all set for 'em, posse an' all, they'd blow up and lie their way out of it some way. I know my uncle. Besides, I got things o' my own to settle on this range; and I plumb intend to settle 'em before this night's over. Believe me or not, as yuh choose—but yo're hearin' the truth

from me."

Calvert sighed a long sigh. He looked at his daughter. Her eyes were steady, fearless eyes. Finally, he said:

"All right; maybe yo're right. Yo're right about that idea of wipin' 'em off complete and for good, anyhow. But I don't like Montana bein' brought into this."

"Montana," said Dan steadily, "is a bad man. But he has been my friend, and you have no cause for grievance against him. I'm aimin', Mister Calvert, to do what we do when there's a prairie fire. Yuh know what that is . . ."

"Start a back-fire," Calvert guessed, though still puzzled.

"Right the first time! My uncle Bart is a mean, sneakin' prairie fire. And I happen to have compadres that ain't sneakin' no wise, but who're jest as bad when it comes to bein' bad men. I speak o' Montana and his crew. That's why I sent for him."

Lucia put in: "He'll come, you think?"

Dan said, "I think he will. Once I saved Montana's life, when one of his men got hold o' too much *tequila* and went runnin' amok, down in Durango. But if he won't help, we're plumb sunk."

"How about a posse from town?"

Dan shrugged. "I aim to see Ben Corliss 'fore long. But I don't aim t' get much out of him. He won't take an outlaw's word for this; and it's only two bad men who know about it."

Lucia put in: "I don't think Ben would raise a posse just on Dan's word, Dad. And if he did—"

"If he did," cut in Dan, "the posse'd be all drawn up there when the raiders come . . . and we'd have nothin' on 'em; sabe? The word o' Bart Ransome against mine would carry weight. They'd take me off, hold me—and Bart'd be free, whatever they did to me, to settle back till he was ready to strike again."

There was a momentary silence. Dan could hear the old clock tick on the top of Calvert's battered desk. He looked at Lucia, and he saw faith in her eyes. It helped him, because Dan was far from certain of his ground. In the back of his head, there was more than one plan. Tonight he had to prove his innocence, or take the long trail, the outlaw trail, again. Or worse.

He thought he knew how he would do it; but the hazard was great. And, now, too there was so much at stake—much more than there had been when he and Garcia had crossed the Line headed northward a short time back.

Calvert got to his feet. His weather-beaten face was set with new lines, grim ones.

"Danny," he said, "I'm goin' to give yuh yore chance to run things yore own way. That yore vote, Lucia?"

"Yes," said Lucia, "it is."

Dan swallowed hard. He flushed. "Thank yuh," he managed. "I—we'll come through. Leave it in my hands. By morning, this'll all be over—or I won't be alive for yuh to tell me I failed."

VI

IN the afternoon, late, Dan mounted a fresh horse and turned his face toward Caguas. They watched him go. There was trouble in the eyes of all who saw him, for by now the Glynn brothers had been told the news. They had elected to stay on and face whatever was coming.

The sun was almost touching the rim of the far-off Quicapos peaks when Dan left. He rode without elation, brooding in his eyes. He was taking long chances, now and afterward. He counted on the fairness of Ben Corliss; but he knew that he was still a marked man on these plains. And afterward . . . he did not dare look too far ahead.

Shadows were in every ravine and coulee; sage and grass were alike empurpled with the dying sun. Dan was not riding fast; his pace matched his reluctance for the self-imposed errand. Back of him Oliver lay trussed. Ahead lay he knew not what. But he wanted to solve everything that night.

Cottonwoods shadowed deeply the road he was following. He allowed his pony the way, scarcely bothering with the reins, his thoughts all turned inward. A bend in the trail materialized ahead of him. Suddenly, startling his introspection, came a sharp, a familiar sound. He jerked up by instinct.

From the opposite direction a rider was approaching.

A long this trail, just now, it was well to be cautious. Dan touched his pony with knees and spurs, and in an instant, he was off the trail, hidden completely in bush.

The rider seemed in no hurry. Presently, he rounded the bend in the trail. Dan saw a dark, swarthy man, dressed more like a vacquero than a Texan puncher, with silver studding his bridle rein, his hat band, and even—glowing in the faint light—the ornate revolver he wore. The rider was humming a little; it was a Spanish *danza* that often Rafael had sung.

Instantly it flashed across Dan's mind—the one man of his uncle's crew that he did not know—Ortiz, the new foreman of the Diamond-R. Ortiz!

Quickly Dan made up his mind. Here was a potential enemy. Left alone now, he would pass without harm. But taken now he would be one man out of the way for the battle impending.

The idea was no sooner formulated than it was acted upon. A touch of the spur and Dan's mount blocked the road. The lone rider in the vacquero's dress was looking into two round .44 barrels, back of which were Dan's eyes. Green eyes, now, for the steel-gray had fled with danger, flecking them with a strange fire.

"Senor Ortiz—*no esta?*" came from behind the muzzles of the twin guns.

The man started to reach for his own weapon. But he thought better of it. Somewhere light had glinted into the depths of Dan's eyes. Dan heard, in sibilant Spanish:

"*Si.* Pedro Ortiz. *Pero*—but—"

"That's all I wanted to know," Dan told him. "Turn yore cayuse around and keep yore fingers clear o' that gun!"

The Mexican had no choice but to obey. When his back was turned, Dan shoved one of his guns into its holster, spurred up, and flipped free the silver-studded weapon of his uncle's range boss.

Then, carelessly, he tossed his lariat over the Mexican's head. Ortiz, his eyes frightened. Dan grinned as the rope settled about the other man's neck.

"No," he said, "yuh ain't due for hangin'—yet. We'll jest ride in my direction for awhile. There's a pal o' yourn I want yuh to meet. Come on—*vamosnos!*"

Ortiz was studying him. "So it is true," he said. "You are Dan Ransome—back."

They were riding. Dan's smile was frozen.

"That's right," he said. "Back and—I hope—in time. Know where we're goin'?"

"No." The Mexican was cool enough; and Dan did not suffer himself for an instant to believe that the man had not courage.

"That pal o' yourn I mentioned awhile back—it's Pete Oliver. Me and my compadre picked him up last night. Reckon he musta been talkin' to you, huh?"

The Mexican started. "You—heard?"

"Uh-huh. You and somebody else. It wasn't my uncle, so I don't care much. I heard enough. Gonna be a nice little raid, eh?"

Ortiz made no answer. They rode on in silence. Then Dan led the Mexican off the trail, headed for the place where he had left Oliver. There he dismounted, and with a jerk of the rope, made Ortiz get to the ground, too. From the interior of the black cavern, they heard a curse.

Dan's brows raised. Oliver must have managed to work loose the gag. He shoved Ortiz into the darkness ahead of him.

"Now," he said, "lie down on yore face, and put yore hands behind yuh. Don't object too much, Ortiz; it's either that, or yuh get drilled.

ORTIZ looked long and curiously at Oliver. Then, with a philosophical sigh, he did as he was bidden. Dan trussed him tightly, drawing the knots up so that Ortiz's wrists and his ankles were only inches apart. Then he went to Oliver, and this time made certain of the man bonds.

Outside, he attached the reins of the mount he had captured to the rear of his own saddle. Then he started again into Caguas. Halfway there, he cut off the road and drove Ortiz' pony into the shelter of some bushes. There he hobbled the beast; and set out once more.

By this time full dark had come. Wary of the two traps that he had engineered for his enemies, Dan was more than usually cautious for the remainder of his ride.

However, presently he saw the faint lights of Caguas and was ambling down the slope into the town.

It was at an hour when most of the inhabitants were eating, or else having the evening pipe after eating; and the town was very quiet. Dan poked his mount down the street, a slight smile appearing in his troubled eyes as they roved over these hauntingly familiar scenes. No one noticed him walk his horse past the *Diamond-Flush;* and he saw only one or two men at the bar there.

Ahead was the sheriff's office. He slipped from his saddle when he reached it. A light was inside. He knocked on the warped door, and a voice hailed:

"Come in!"

He opened the door, closed it behind him. On the far side of the square room, its rough boarding tacked up with calendars and reward posters, sat Ben Corliss. Corliss' gun hung on a peg behind him, within easy reach. He was a young man, with clear blue eyes and a face that, though wind- and sun-burned, looked as though it had never needed a shave. He had a heavy, wilful jaw.

Corliss peered beyond the lamplight at his visitor. Then the sheriff's eyes suddenly narrowed.

"Dan Ransome!" he cried.

Ransome moved forward easily. "Yes, it's Dan Ransome, Ben. Ransome, puttin' his head into the lion's jaws . . . countin' plenty on the fact that yo're still a white man!"

"Meanin' what?"

Dan commenced rolling a cigarette, and hung one leg over the edge of the sorely battered desk. He said:

"What yuh've got on me, Ben, is suspicion for the killin' of Mark Seeley, I reckon. That so?"

"That's so. And I'll be fair enough to say that it's only suspicion, up till now. An' even that's yore fault. Yuh didn't stay for questions, after yuh was heard to state out loud that yuh was aimin' t' gun Mark Seeley."

"I didn't kill Seeley, Ben."

Corless showed no emotion over that. "I suppose yuh can prove that, Dan," he said quietly.

"That's what I come for," replied Dan. "An' other things, too. Now, Ben, I got two bad hombres nicely tied up in a cave out in the hills. Both of 'em know who killed Seeley. Both of 'em are in on a rustlin' job that's comin' off tonight."

"What!"

"That's what I said. Bart Ransome's got a gang that's goin' to tackle the Circle-C spread before midnight."

Corliss shot to his feet. "If yo're sure, Dan—!"

"Wait a minute, Ben," Dan admonished. "Wait till yuh hear the whole story. The rustlin' ain't goin' to be till eleven. But between now and then, I want yuh to ride out to this cave o' mine, in the hills, and hear two rats spit out the truth o' who killed Seeley."

"Who are the rats—and who did?" Corliss demanded.

"The rats? . . . One of 'em's been foreman o' the Circle-C for months. Dunno how he got the job, neither. We'll find that out. The other—he's my uncle's foreman on the rancho that rightfully belongs to me, a Mex, name of—"

"Ortiz!"

"Yeah, Ortiz. And for the other question, I don't know who did; but I got a hunch it was my revered uncle. He had most t' gain by throwin' the job to look like it was mine. I propose we both go out to that little cave right now, alone—and we two listen to them aforesaid rats tell me and you the truth about Mark Seeley's killin'. They's time in plenty before the raid starts."

BEN CORLISS' eyes were alight. He half turned to the wall, slapped on his hat, and reached for his gunbelt. Over his shoulder, he said:

"I heard yuh was bad, and I don't guess, Dan, that the fact was exaggerated. But I grew up with yuh; and that killin' from the roadside that night never looked like a job o' yourn. Come on; I'm with yuh. But about this rustlin' business—"

"We can let that wait," Dan said. "We'll get one thing straight at a time; and it's hours before the rustlin' party is scheduled."

Corliss looked dubious, but he allowed himself to be persuaded. He strode to the door with Dan, and flung it open.

"All right, let's go," he said.

They went out, mounted, and were soon streaking into the hills. Corliss allowed Dan to take the lead.

Caguas was soon left far behind them and they were riding in the darkness of

the hills. Corliss pressed the pace; he seemed eager to get this immediate affair over with, so that they could concentrate on the rest of the night's program.

The moon had risen. The trail wound serene under its silver light. The night promised to be clear.

Dan breathed a low order. They shifted off the trail and struck toward the cavern where his two prisoners lay. Dan lessened his pace; and when his companion drew up alongside him, he pointed to where the opening of the cave blotted dark against the rock towering over it.

"They're in there," he said.

"Who is the other one besides Ortiz?"

"Pete Oliver; I heard him last night arrangin' with Ortiz for the raid. Rafael and I caught him right after that. Then, today, on my way into town to see you, I ran smack into this Ortiz hombre. Knowin' what I knew, I thought it'd be a good idea to put one more of 'em out o' the way before the activities of the evenin' commenced. Here we are."

They dismounted within twenty yards of the cave, then walked stiff-legged toward the black opening. Suddenly Dan gave a cry, and Corliss echoed it.

A snarl came out of the darkness. Something was hurled between them, a rock. They had a vision of two glaring eyes—then of a slender body hurling itself out of the cavern.

"Ortiz!" Dan cried.

The sheriff echoed the cry. For seconds a cloud passed over the face of the moon. Even as their guns dragged from holsters, Ortiz seemed to vanish. They held their fire and stumbled forward. Dan shot past the cave mouth, threw himself around to the bushes that grew close in the rear. There came a rustling; that was all. He turned back. Corliss had stood in the mouth of the cave.

As Dan spun about, he heard Corliss give a cry of mingled rage and chagrin. He saw the sheriff's cayuse rear straight upward, the catlike figure of Ortiz clinging to its back. Corliss fired—twice.

The crimson stabs of his gunflare cut the dark. But the shots must have gone wild, or the horse, curveting in fright, had thrown his rider out of danger. Anyway, like a streak, the frightened pony darted off, and Ortiz vanished. Corliss made a dash for Dan's horse, but Dan halted him.

"Wait, Ben! That's only one of 'em. Pete Oliver's still inside there. We can get Ortiz later."

Corliss halted, breath coming fast. His eyes were angry. Dan took Corliss by the arm and pushed him inside the cavern. This was just the mood—though he had not counted on securing it—that he wanted Ben Corliss to be in when he got him here.

His match flared. In its light, they saw Oliver lying on his side, staring at them in patent fear. Dan crossed and examined the foreman's bonds.

They had been loosened. The gag was out of Oliver's mouth. Evidently, the two prisoners had been helping each other to work free when the interruption came. Dan, breathing more heavily than usual, bent and made certain of the bonds, now. He left the gag on the stone floor. Then he lit a match again, and this time Oliver's frightened eyes took in the tall, furious figure of the sheriff.

Dan said: "I counted on havin' Ortiz here, too, Ben. But I reckon this hombre'll be enough. Pete, we come to have yuh tell us what yuh know."

CORLISS supplied, breathing more easily now, but with fury still in his voice: "If yuh make a clean breast, Oliver, and it's what I think it is—and yuh ain't guilty yoreself of no killin'—I'll see yuh either git free as State's evidence, or I'll personally let yuh loose for the Line . . . where Ortiz's gone, I reckon."

"I only hope that's where he's headed," Dan said.

"Yeah. We know there's a raid tonight, Oliver, and that yo're supposed to be in on it. I could hold yuh and string yuh for that; *sabe?* Well, take yore choice. Tell me what yuh know about who killed Mark Seeley."

"It wasn't me!"

"Nobody thinks so. But yuh know who did!" Dan said.

Oliver was silent. They waited. At last, Oliver seemed to have got the proposition straight. He said:

"I supposed I kin trust yuh?"

"Not me, maybe!" Dan laughed harshly. "But yo're talkin' to the sheriff, now."

Oliver grunted. "All right; I'll tell what I know. Maybe you two know the rest. And maybe it won't help yuh. . . .

But I come into Caguas the day o' the killin', broke and lookin' for a job."

"I can verify that much," said Corliss. "Git on."

"Well, I was in the saloon, hopin' t' meet up with some ranchero or somebody who had a job loose. Thet poker game was on. I heard Dan Ransome threaten t' kill Mark Seeley—threaten hard!"

"We know about that," Corliss said. "Then Ransome went out, and—"

"Got drunker than he was," Dan supplied grimly.

"Yeah," assented Oliver. "But Bart Ransome come in, and he stood me a drink. I didn't know him, then. But he bought me a couple, and I hit him for a job. He said he didn't have any chances jest then, but he might have work for me."

"What kind o' work?" Corliss asked.

"I'm a-comin' to that. He looked me over, an' he set 'em up some more. I opened up and told him about the argument Dan Ransome had there, with Seeley, and how it ended. He seemed to study that, plenty. He bought some more, then he takes me outside."

"And offered yuh money t' kill Seeley!" Dan cried.

A space of silence intervened. Then Oliver said: "I reckon that's about right. But I wouldn't do it. I ain't no killer. So he compromised. He told me to stick t' Seeley, who was gettin' drunker an' drunker all the time. He said if I'd manage to take Seeley home, t' lead him off the path to—to—"

"To where they found his body!" Dan snarled.

"Thet's it. He said if I'd do thet, he'd see I got a job, either with him or somebody else, pronto; and he gave me two hundred gold for my job. Well, I figgered it was easy money, without no killin' to be done—by me."

Corliss breathed heavily. Slowly he said:

"So yuh did it. Yuh brought Seeley to where Bart Ransome was waitin'. Or was it Bart Ransome?"

"It was Bart Ransome, alone. I seen him."

"Wonder he didn't put lead into yuh to keep yuh from talkin'," Dan mused.

Corliss considered that. But before it could be considered further, Oliver aided them:

"He might've, at thet. But he didn't. 'Cause why? 'Cause he wanted a man he could trust workin' on his neighbor's range!"

Corliss gave a quick exclamation. "So that's how come yuh got the job on the Circle-C!"

"Yeah. If yuh'll remember, these Quicapos was peaceful country, then. An' Bart Ransome was a-payin' heavy court to Miss Lucia. He brought me over. I'm a good hand, and I got a job. Afterwards, the rustlin' commenced, and I was takin' orders from Bart. One night—"

"Sam Powers—the foreman before you got the job—he got lead poisoning!" Corliss rasped.

"Yeah." Oliver's voice was low, now. "Thet's it. I'm not a killer, sheriff; but Bart Ransome made good for me. Powers was killed by Bart Ransome's men in a raid."

Dan was breathing softly. His eyes were alight. He heard Corliss straighten in the dark; felt the tall sheriff go erect beside him; felt Corliss's hand on his shoulder. Corliss was saying:

"Let's git out, Dan. Reckon we've heard enough."

From the floor Oliver's voice came: "How 'bout me?"

At the entrance, Corliss halted. "I'll make good, all the way through, Oliver. But till the events o' this promisin' evening are over—yo're safer here."

Oliver made no protest; probably he was in agreement.

Outside, under the stars, Corliss halted. Slowly he said: "I'm glad, Dan. Bart Ransome's the man. And Bart Ransome—"

"Bart Ransome's raidin' the Circle-C with his whole crowd tonight, Ben!" Dan exclaimed.

CORLISS was instantly alert. He had been thinking of other things in the last few seconds. Now he swore.

"An' my hawss—!"

"Ride double with me for awhile. This afternoon, I took that pony Ortiz was ridin' and hobbled him down aways."

"Good!"

They went on again. Underneath the alders they found Ortiz' horse. Corliss slid into the saddle, then paused. He seemed looking to Dan for the next move.

Dan said: "It won't be time for 'em

yet, Ben; or it wouldn't be, if things had gone accordin' to plan. As it is, Rafael won't be up till later. But with Ortiz gettin' loose, it kind o' upsets things. Yuh see, he'll tell Bart everything's happened. Bart'll know that now he's against the wall, that he's standin' to win or lose everything in the world as a result o' tonight!"

"So he'll make the attack earlier,"

"Right. Now I'll ride back to the ranch, help how I can there. You, Ben, the best you can do now is chance gettin' a couple of men down in Caguas for a posse. They won't be too willin' to sail in against Bart's gang, and yuh might have no luck at all. But we got to do what we can. Will you try it?"

"Sure as hell! I'll pick up anybody who'll come—even if it's only a couple—and ride back to Circle-C."

They spurred off in opposite directions.

VII

GREGG CALVERT and Lucia were in the living room when Dan Ransome's mount reached the verandah. They heard his spurs clink as he came in. He entered hastily and found them looking at him with wide, hopeful eyes. They waited for him to speak.

"Things 've gone wrong," he announced. "We're in for it. I had Ortiz and Oliver prisoners. Just now, Corliss and I let Ortiz get clean away. That'll hasten things, plenty. Corliss 's gone back to Caguas to see if he can pick up a couple o' men who 'll be willin' to face Bart Ransome's guns; but we haven't got much hope, there. Who's with us here?"

"Jest the Glynn boys," answered Calvert, with a frown. "Shorty's out in the kitchen right now."

They were looking to Dan. He did not speak for a moment. Then Lucia spoke:

"Ben Corliss knows?"

Dan nodded. "I talked to Ben," he said. "Then Ben and I rode out to where I'd tied up Oliver an Ortiz. They were both there. Ben came out with me while we heard the confession—"

"About the raid?"

"No. The confession of the killin'!"

Lucia caught her breath. Her father seemed to forget his worries for the moment. "Mark Seeley's killin'?" he demanded.

"Yes. It was a Ransome did it all right—but not this Ransome!" Dan told them the story Oliver had told to him and Corliss. He did not see the light of worry die from Lucia's eyes, and the relief that came to take its place. Gregg Calvert, however, beamed.

Rising, he said: "Well, Dan, no matter what comes o' tonight, that's plenty to be thankful for. Yuh ain't afraid o' dyin', I know, but I reckon yuh'd never wanted to die with the suspicion o' that black mark on yore name."

"You're right," said Dan, his voice husky. He dared not look at Lucia. "But we got t' get some action now. They'll be comin' soon—yuh see, now Bart 'll have to make a clean sweep here, now we know about him. He'll have to wipe out everything!"

"He can't wipe out Ben Corliss!"

"But Ben ain't here, and he's the only other witness to Pete Oliver's story. And—later—if I know Bart Ransome, he'll be able to fix Corliss too." He added, gloomily, "Like Seeley . . . from the dark!"

The girl shuddered. Hoofbeats sounded at that moment, from outdoors. They all turned. Spurs clanked across the verandah, and Lefty swung in through the door, the screen banging after him.

"I seen 'em, boss! They're a-comin'! Must be more than twenty of 'em, ridin' in a spread-out line!"

There was a space of silence. Lefty added: "They don't seem to be hurryin' none."

Dan rasped: "They figure there's no need, now."

Shorty ran in from the direction of the kitchen. He was rapidly apprised of the news. They looked to Dan. Dan crisped:

"We got to hold 'em off. Get us some rifles, boss. Lefty, you and me and Shorty, let's get out there an' do some long range work to sorta slow 'em up. Maybe Corliss 'll be along with a couple o' boys from town soon."

Calvert came with three Remingtons. He handed one to Dan, a second to Lefty, and said:

"You stay here with Lucia, Shorty.

I'm goin' to have a pop or two t' start the fireworks."

Dan, in the doorway, whirled. "No, yo're not, boss. Give Shorty that third gun! It's you who's goin' to stay here with Lucia. We won't be out there long."

His voice had an edge of command in it. Calvert blinked, muttered a protest; but when Shorty took the gun from him, he said no more. Dan picked up a bandoleer of ammunition in the hallway. Calvert watched the three go out.

They mounted, to ride but a short distance. Lefty led the way. Presently they came to where strewn boulders offered good cover. "Mebbe here," Lefty suggested to Dan. "This is their trail."

Dan assented. They dismounted, hobbled their steeds. They dealt out the rifle cartridges grimly. Dan ordered:

"Now, remember, this is long range stuff. When they get too close, it's us for our cayuses, and back!"

They nodded silently, waited. Then voices came, distorted in the quivering air. The whole sweep of prairie seemed to be alive with an eery life of its own.

A darker shadow, elongated, commenced to take shape. The voices became more clearly distinguishable. Dan rested his rifle coolly on the rock in front of him, aimed for the center of the mass. In one-two-three succession he pumped shots that fanned across its middle. On either side of him, the Glynn boys pressed triggers, and crimson flame vomited into the night.

Cries—curses and oaths—came out of the blackness. For minutes there was confusion. They could hear the tearing shriek of a man in death agony, the even more pitiful scream of a horse. Another horse, riderless, went plunging past their shelter. Instantly, from the band of raiders, yells and shouts went up, commingled. Horses plunged and reared. Men shouted vain orders.

INTO that confusion, the hidden marksmen emptied two more rounds of ammunition. Dan then heard Bart Ransome's voice, hoarse with rage, but still retaining command, shouting:

"Cover, yuh fools! There ain't many of 'em!"

Dan fired with cold precision at the sound of that voice. Not his uncle's voice, but another, testified that the lead had found some mark. Dan swore softly.

The raiders scattered. In the darkness, they were such vague shapes that it was impossible to do any accurate shooting. A kind of silence fell. Then two shots came from near at hand. Dan said:

"They're creepin' up. Get ready to haul out."

He saw a head, indistinct. He pressed trigger. The head had been no more than twenty yards off and with the flash of his rifle, it was no more. A dead silence came; and then a veritable hail of lead swept over the bodies of the three crouched behind the boulders.

"Dan's voice was grim. "Two shots apiece, from each of us. Then snake back for the horses."

They waited. He fired once—twice. From either side of him came the crash of shots. A scream came, a curse. Then Dan was wriggling backward to where they had left their mounts.

He found his, waited, foot in stirrup, till he heard Lefty's voice. "All set," came the rangy cowman's whisper.

Dan swung into the saddle, touched spurs, and the three bounded off. The horses were frightened, and they were more than willing for a neck-stretching gallop. Behind them, guns popped again; yells of frustrated anger leapt out of the dark.

The three raced on, bent low in their saddles, while lead kicked up the ground around them and often whistled over their heads. Horses pounded now in the rear of them.

The lights were low inside the ranch house when they tore past the verandah and leapt from their mounts in the rear. Dan cried out an assurance, and he and his companions threw themselves in through the front door, suddenly opened. The raiders were riding fast behind them. From one of the windows, Gregg Calvert was firing. It had been Lucia who admitted them.

Now the door was bolted again. The lights were all low. Powdersmoke begrimed the old cattleman's face. Dan went for a new supply of ammunition; he had not used his six-guns as yet.

With a swirl, the angry, furious raiders were surrounding the house. They heard a hoarse voice—

"Remember—spare nobody!"

Dan shivered. Then the guns commenced popping. He looked at Lucia. She was calm, her face only slightly flushed from the excitement. She went to her father's side, spoke to him softly. Calvert impatiently pushed her away, out of danger.

The others were firing, methodically now. From the exterior, the voices sounded rage-filled. They were firing, making a pandemonium of noise; but the firing was having little effect on the doors and the barricaded windows.

Came a lull. Then, while they were wondering what it could be about, they heard a bang on the door at the rear. Lucia hurried there, Lefty at her heels, gun ready.

Dan whirled, peered from his post through to the rear. The door swung inward, and through it came, crouching, Ben Corliss and three other men. The door slammed to, and Lucia shot the bolt.

Corliss explained: "When we got close, we started poppin' at 'em from their rear. They went back there to see what it was. We circled, and got in this way."

"Nice work," Dan said. "We'll need yuh."

The newcomers, grim and silent, took their posts. They all had brief, wondering looks for Dan. But they were a hardy crew, in the next few minutes the men outside learned that.

Dan had realized that, with his uncle's desperation, a rush must be the next thing. Now, everyone inside that house had to die. There was no escape for Bart Ransome after this night if any one of the besieged were left alive.

Dan wondered when they would attempt to set fire to the ranch building. That must strike Bart's mind eventually, he knew. But he did not communicate the idea to anyone. It was too awful. He looked for Lucia, and saw her tightening a bandage on her father's forearm. Gregg Calvert had received a ricochet shot.

Then, scarcely had the newcomers got to their places when the raiders launched their attack. Dan knew that under cover of the attack they would attempt to fire the place.

But the house vomited flame from every window and every barricaded opening. On the second floor one of Corliss' deputies dropped back with a bullet through the flesh of his neck, dripping blood. Lucia ran to him.

Some heavy missile battered against the door. Dan lay flat and commenced firing through the stout oak. The door sagged inward. Dan ordered his companions to watch for any attempt to creep up with fire.

From upstairs came Lucia's scream: "Dan—they're bringing fire!"

His heart sank. Darting to the side window, where a board had been leaned, he saw the two men with the burning brush. They were moving, partially covered by a ditch that had been dug to drain off the kitchen water, toward the rear.

He grabbed a rifle and opened fire. A scream came.

While he crouched there, he heard a shot from over his head. He looked up as a yell came from above and saw Ben Corliss, a deadly glint in his narrowed eyes, lower his gun.

"Got 'em!" breathed the sheriff.

VIII

FROM upstairs came a yell that was cut short by a gurgling cry. A body crashed to the floor. Lucia's face paled. The air was thick with hot powdersmoke. Gregg Calvert had moved from his window and was mopping his perspiration-streaked face with his bandanna. He was looking curiously at his arm. His eyes met Dan's, at that cry; and slowly he shook his head.

"They'll be rushin' now," he said.

Dan's eyes looked hunted. Absently he was refilling his rifle, examining his holstered guns that he had not yet touched. And suddenly, into that comparative silence, the cry came—

"Montana!" It was echoed, and echod again. Dan threw up his head, eyes gleaming with hope. "Montana!" Fear vibrated in the hoarse throats that croaked that cry.

They looked at Dan, all who were in the upstairs room. He jammed his guns tight in their holsters, whirled. They saw a new look on his lean face, then. It was not a pleasant look. As he dashed down the stairs, the cry was repeated—only mingling with it now, was hysterical gunfire: "Montana!"

The crescendo of shooting then leapt

to the far-off skies. It was terrific. And in and running through all the turmoil, was that wild reiteration of the border raider's name, in accents that were dripping with fear, screaming in unfathomed terror.

Panic had seized upon the raiders of the Circle-C.

Horses were got in motion, shouts and cries came. Panicky voices were raised from the outdoors. Ignoring danger, Dan stepped to the door and flung it open. Corliss was at his heels.

The night was shot with stabs of flame, livid, hungry flame. They could see the attackers streaking off in every direction. They saw three separate men reel from their saddles and fall to the earth.

Then, through the confusion, burst Rafael Garcia, flinging himself from his horse, stumbling to the door.

"You are safe, *amigo?*" he husked to Dan.

"Safe, still. Montana?"

"He came, willingly enough. He crosses the Line again tonight, before—things happen. This is just—for you."

Corliss uttered a soft ejaculation of amazement.

Dan's eyes blazed with a dull, stubborn flame. "It's all right, then," he said. "My uncle—"

"I saw him! Shot at him, missed. He and one other. They ride—south!"

Dan cursed. "To the Border!" he cried. "That'll be Ortiz with him. They know it's all up, now. *Adios!*"

They cried out after him, but he was gone. Into the shadows at the rear of the house he ran, his face stony, his eyes hot with a fury that could have but one expression.

His horse was at the rear. He did not hear them call out after him as he flung himself into the saddle. For Dan Ransome, only half of tonight's work was done.

Savagely he raked in his spurs; and the gallant little mount he bestrode answered him. He heard them cry out behind him, but he deafened his ears. They would be trying to dissuade him; he knew that. Lucia would appeal, perhaps; he knew that. But they did not know that, to him, nothing mattered beyond the completion of the task he had set himself when he crossed the Border. He might still be killed tonight; but he would die with his own and his father's name avenged, the knowledge of a long injustice wiped clear.

He knew the trail that the two fugitives would take. Probably Ortiz and Bart Ransome—like he and Rafael years back—would find haven and friends below the Line. Once across, they would be safe. Safe, with their own kind—outlaws, branded men, men without honor or shame.

His pony seemed to recognize his need. The ground rolled beneath him. Shadows flecked the trail; but Dan Ransome knew the trail. He rode with set face and that amber light in the back of his steel-gray eyes.

The way ran through a V-shaped formation of rock. Dan expected no ambush, not yet, but he was ready for it should it come.

Ahead, there was a stretch of open desert, with only the harder-packed sand to mark the trail . . . the trail that led to where men who had broken man's and God's law could sometimes find haven. Beyond that open stretch, the foothills rose.

The pallid moon shone down with calm aloofness.

The trail led directly across the open space, and then the horse and rider were blurred to any who might be following, by the long, purple shadow of the foothills.

DAN did not slacken his speed. Beyond this mound of earth and rock, he knew by experience that there was a clear, open passage to the haven his fugitives sought.

Then—with a suddenness that startled even him—wary as he was at this point for an obstacle, a shot barked ahead of him. Lead whined scant inches from his jaw. He saw the stab of red flame.

Cursing, he rode for it. Loosed the guns in their holsters. When the first shot did not halt him, two more sang out. Dan felt a tug at his shirt. It only made his eyes blaze the more madly; it never caused him to slacken his pace.

Then two shots came at once. With an abrupt motion, even as he felt a hot streak whip along his jaw, he fired at the flash. A yell of pain came, a scramble, and he put spurs to his beast and came on. There sounded an oath from the dark ahead.

Two shots came again. Dan rode into the shots, which were spaced about two feet apart. Then his guns came up, and their challenge startled echoes in that confined space.

A hit! He himself presented a weaving, bobbing target. By now, he could discern the two figures on horseback who were awaiting him. He shifted from side to side in his saddle, came on.

Gun thunder blasted the silence of the gully. The air rang with the hot fury of it. Dan found himself pumping lead. He heard a distorted scream.

Then, he seemed to be staring directly into the mouth of one of Ortiz' guns. Half mad, he rode as though to ride it down. He was aware of the blast of the weapon in his eyes—aware that his pony had been struck and was falling.

Instinct made him fall clear of the stirrups. He landed on his side, both guns in his hands, his maddened mount kicking and screaming pitifully.

Dan knew that he had been hit, knew he was wounded. But through the red haze before his eyes now, he could see the figures of his two enemies. As another shot ripped out from the blot they made, boring through his shoulder blade, he took aim and fired.

A startled, disbelieving cry came from the target. Ortiz screamed a savage oath in his native tongue—spun around with his gun waving in circles over his head—then crashed headlong to the shale.

Bart Ransome stepped back, shouting something unintelligible. It was a shout of fear. Bart Ransome started to run; but he appeared to have no sense of direction.

Dan lurched to his feet, dripping blood. Weaved, until he stood, in the moonlight, over the motionless body of Ortiz, the twin guns in his hands. Ahead of him he saw his uncle. His guns were at the level of his hips. He heard Bart Ransome cry out—

"Don't shoot! Stop! I'll surrender—!"

Dan shook his head, tried to believe. His uncle's figure was only a misty blur. He half lowered his guns.

Lowered them just enough for the purpose of his enemy. Instantly, the gully rocked with the crash of Bart Ransome's single weapon.

Dan staggered, almost fell. There was a burning, unbelievable pain in his groin. His head felt dizzy from where lead had creased the skull at his temple.

Crimson hazed his vision. He knew he was going to topple. Felt himself going, knees buckling. In those last seconds, he tightened his fingers on the triggers of his guns. They blazed.

When he fell forward, his heels almost touching the body of Ortiz, he knew that Bart Ransome had gone first. Even that last bit of treachery had not worked. Whatever came now, he had wiped out that injustice. It was over.

BUT something struggled through his half-dead senses to tell him that his job was not done. There was something else . . . something else . . .

He knew, a little later. He blinked his eyes open and saw serene stars. There was no sound. A voice, a gentle voice, was saying:

"Try, Danny boy, try . . . Drink this."

Whisky was at his lips, in a flask. It gurgled hotly down his throat. He was able to see that his head was pillowed in Lucia's arms, that the flask was being held to his mouth by Rafael Garcia. It helped. He closed his eyes and muttered to his friend:

"*Gracias, amigo mio* . . . We have—finished, eh?"

"All finished," came Rafael Garcia's low voice, surprisingly tender, of a sudden.

Dan's eyes were closed. He was deliciously aware of the arms that pillowed his head. Then he remembered. The task was completed—almost. When he looked up again at Lucia, he knew what the rest of it was.

She was bending over him. Her eyes were misty with warm tears; but they were happy tears. Her head had been very close to his, her lips had been very near his.

Yes, he knew the task, now. Everything was finished, tonight, except this. He reached up a weak hand to the girl's face, touched her damp cheek.

"There is no reason now, for me to . . . to go away again; is there . . . *caria mia?*" he faltered.

Her smile was very happy, tremulously happy.

"No reason now," Lucia whispered, low. She added, a catch in her voice, "Unless you want to leave . . . me."

Hot-Lead Antidote

by SHERMAN BAKER

Author of "Renegades Shouldn't Be Rustlers," etc.

Only a quick-trigger autopsy would save Jerry Custer from a Colt medico's powdersmoke cure-all, but that gun-hammer operation condemned Jerry's lawman father to boothill!

THERE was a drumming of hoofs in the darkness outside the ranch-house, then a moment of silence. Inside, in the flickering yellow light of the bedroom, young Jerry Custer rose abruptly from his chair. He listened intently, lips half parted, then looked quickly down at his father. Old Sheriff Custer stirred restlessly in his crumpled bed, opened feverish eyes and rolled his head toward his son.

"Jerry, it's the Doc. Watch him close, boy. . . ."

His words trailed off into a deep groan. There were heavy steps on the porch. The tread came toward the bedroom, measured, somehow ominous. Young Jerry Custer stiffened, took a step backward, fingers curled instinctively over the black gun-butt at his thigh. The sound of bootheels came to the door, then stopped. The battered door creaked sharply, and swung open, and Doc Maxton strode into the room. A dust-covered sombrero was pushed back from his head, letting the lamplight play on the darkened grimness of his face. Through the shadows his black-steel eyes stabbed dangerously at the two men. He was silent, menacing, his whole pose a threat of death.

He tossed his medicine kit on the bed, and shouldered his way over to the young cowboy, snarling.

"What the hell's the matter with him now? Why'd you have to send for me again?"

At the sound of his voice the old man in the bed opened his eyes again, moistened his lips, and started to speak, then stopped, too weak to continue. Jerry Custer looked at his father, then glanced over at the broad-shouldered, evil-faced doctor. Their eyes met, locked, in dra-

matic tenseness. The young waddy was slim, wiry. There was a dry redness in his eyes, and his face was pale beneath its tan. He was the first to break the silence again, and his voice was harsh, strained.

"Doc, I had to send for you! Dad is worse. . . . I'm scared he. . . ."

"Scared he—what?" Doc Maxton's thin lips barely parted to permit the words to escape, then snapped shut again, while his eyes flickered ominously at the young cowpuncher. Death, chill and sinister, seemed to peer at Jerry Custer.

"Well . . . he seemed better this morning when you came out. The bullet wound in his back is a heap better, Doc, but . . . after I gave him one of them pills a little while ago, he seemed to get worse, somehow. An' now. . . ."

"Did you give him the rest, like I told you?"

"No, I wanted to wait, an' see you first, before I give him the others. I wondered mebby. . . ."

"You wondered! Well, quit wondering pronto, button, an' hand me them pills! You want your old man to get well, don't you?"

"Sure I do, but I wondered mebby there's some mistake about them pills, an' they might be poison. I just wondered what the antidote might be for that poison, if it is . . ."

"Mistake! Poison! What the hell're you talking about?"

The big medico straightened his wide shoulders. His hand hovered, trigger-finger crooked, over the low-slung Colt at his side. It was apparent that he might draw, and that when he did, death would flash from the black gun-muzzle, and that any man in his path would crumple to the floor in agony.

BUT the young cowboy in front of him changed his expression immediately.

"God, Doc, I don't know what I'm sayin'! . . . I guess I'm half crazy from worrying about Dad! I ain't slept much since he got shot, neither. . . . I wanted Dad to make me a deputy so's I could get the bushwhacker that shot him, but Dad says I'm too young yet. But I'll prove to him I'm not too young . . . somehow!"

* * * *

The big man relaxed, twisted his face into a smile.

"Hell, Jerry, I told you that no hombre around here drygulched your Dad. I own damn near all this country, an' I know what I'm talkin' about!"

There was a groan from the bed, and Sheriff Custer opened his eyes again. This time his eyes were wide, expressionless, staring. He seemed to be sinking into death before their very gaze. The sight seemed to galvanize Jerry Custer.

"I don't care about the bushwhacker now—I just want to pull Dad outa this!"

"All right, give him another one of them pills."

Jerry Custer pulled a small box out of his pocket, and opened it. There were several white pills in it. The young cowpuncher's face was tense, his voice flat.

"Doc Maxton, you're the only doctor in the hull county, an' the only man who knows about these things. Suppose this was—just by accident—some kind of poison—what would you give Dad to save him?"

"Hell, button, that's medicine for your Dad—that's all! Looks like he's dying—better give it to him pronto!"

The young cowboy stepped back toward the bed on which lay his father. His face was almost as white as the dying man's. His jaws tightened, and his chin lifted slightly.

"Doc Maxton," he blurted suddenly, "you an' Dad have been enemies for years! Dad is all that is in your way now! If it wasn't for Dad you'd be complete boss of all o' Santa Cruz county! Dad is the only honest man left in all your dirty kingdom o' rustlers an' drygulchers! . . . If these pills are just medicine, let me see you take one yourself!"

Both men glared at each other. The young waddy advanced toward the big man in challenge, the box of pills in his hand.

"Take one. . . . Go ahead, take one!" His voice was little more than a whisper.

The dark-faced doctor's lips parted slightly. His eyes were twin knife-slits of flame. His great hulk was rigid, poised. His voice was icy.

"You young fool! You're accusing me of poisoning Sheriff Custer! Don't worry, you can never prove it! You'll never live to try to prove it! . . . You

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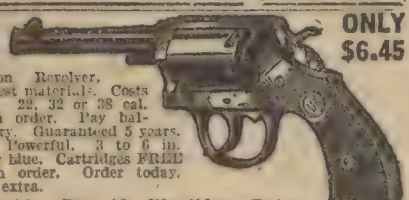

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needn't worry about any antidote. . . . I'll give him them pills myself! You might as well know before you die that I was the one that shot your Dad! Now, damn you!"

At these words, the big doctor ripped his gun out in a flashing draw, thumbed the hammer. The gun roared. Young Jerry was a split second faster and leaped aside. The bullet whipped his sleeve, thudded harmlessly into the wall behind him. Burning powder stung Jerry's eyes, but in a rattler-like spring he smashed his fist into the big man's chin. All his force was behind it. Doc Maxton reeled, his second shot splintering the boards at his feet. He swayed, crumpled heavily to the floor, and lay still.

Jerry stood, breathing hard, over the fallen man for a moment, then walked over to the bed. He turned the oil lamp higher and looked closely at his father. The sheriff was breathing in short, throaty gasps. His eyes were closed, and he seemed not to be aware any longer of his surroundings. Jerry muttered, wheeled, and went over to the unconscious doctor again. He picked the white pills up off the floor where they had fallen, and bent over the big man.

A FEW minutes later the doctor stirred, groaned, opened his eyes, looked vacuously at the ceiling, then closed them again. Outside, somewhere in the ghost-shadowed darkness around the ranch-house, a coyote howled mournfully, and was answered by another. The horse tethered at the hitch-rail by the porch, snorted and stamped his hoof. Inside the room, in the yellow cone of light, old Sheriff Custer breathed in rapid, shuddering groans. Jerry looked at his father, then his eyes cut back like a keen knife to the big man on the floor.

Doc Maxton opened his eyes again, raised his head, and looked around the room. He saw the black muzzle of Jerry's big Colt yawning hungrily down at him, and his dark pupils contracted. His whole body tensed like a panther poised for the kill. Then suddenly his expression changed. His tongue was running suspiciously over his lips. He shrieked wildly, fell back to the floor, hand rubbing his lips.

"You've given 'em to me!" He screamed. "You've given me the ar-

scenic pills while I was unconscious!" He sat up in sudden convulsive terror. "Quick! Get my bag! I must have the antidote! Carbonate of iron! It's in the bag, marked! Then oil, or milk, or butter! Quick!" His voice had risen to a ghastly scream.

Jerry's lips drew back from his teeth in an agonized smile. "Sure, I'll get 'em. Thanks for tellin' me what to use! But I'll give 'em to Dad first!" He reached for the battered medicine bag.

Doc Maxton had controlled his terror now. Pale, tense, his hand flicked out for his gun. Jerry saw him, called out, "Drop that gun, or I'll kill you!"

For answer, the big man suddenly rolled over, aimed his gun as he came up on the other side. It spit fire and smoke. The room shook with its reverberations. The oil lamp near the bed tinkled, blinked out. The night rushed in and blotted everything. A tense silence like the dark curtain of death settled over the pitch-black room.

Jerry heard the big doctor roll over once again, and start to rise to his feet. This time Jerry was ready, and estimated the big man's position. He fired quickly, the orange flame lighting the room for an infinitesimal instant. Mingling with the thunder of the gun there was a heavy thud as the slug struck living flesh and bone. The doctor crashed to the ground like a sack of ore, and lay still.

Just to make certain, Jerry moved his position, and fired again. Even before the gun-flash stabbed at the darkness again, he knew that the doctor was dead. The shot went home with a sickening sound. Jerry holstered his pistol, and lighted another lamp. He watched his fingers as they held the match, and felt a sudden thrill of pride in their steadiness.

AS the lamp-light flooded the room, Jerry picked up the medicine kit, opened it. Neatly arranged inside the bag were rows of bottles and little cases, all marked with their contents. Jerry picked out the proper medicine the doctor had specified for himself, and forced it between his father's lips. Then he ran out for some olive oil and some milk.

When he came back into the bedroom, his father's eyes were open, and looking around with an expression that told

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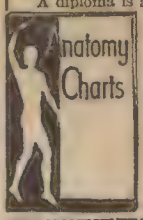

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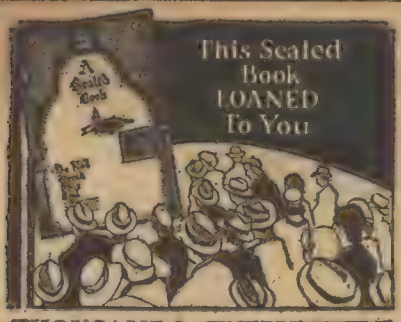

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"Reckon he poisoned me, eh?"

"Sure did, Dad, but I got him!"

Sheriff Custer felt better every minute. He raised himself on his elbows. There was a strange light in his eyes.

"Reach me that badge on the table, Jerry, boy."

With shaking fingers he pinned it on his son's shirt. They both fell silent, shaken with the tenseness of unspoken words. Then the old sheriff spoke again.

"Reckon you ain't too young, no more, Jerry. . . . But, son, how'd you get him to tell you what to give me for the poison, boy?"

"That was easy, Dad. I wanted him to have a taste of his own medicine! But I wanted to make sure an' have him wake up an' tell me just what to give you, Dad. So I just rubbed one o' them pills over his lips, so's he could taste it plenty when he came to!"

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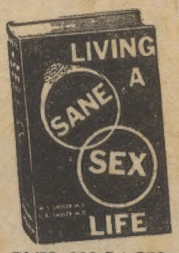
From classrooms and homes . . . from pulpits and platforms . . . this nationwide outcry for sane sex education is heard above the din of modern life. The conventional "hush" has disappeared. No longer is sex education "taboo." Parents, wives, husbands, sweethearts, college men and coeds, want the TRUTH about sex and its relation to health and happiness.



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No other Physical Instructor in the World has ever DARED make such an offer!

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Write your name and address carefully on the coupon below. I'll send you absolutely free a copy of my new book, **"Everlasting Health and Strength."** It reveals the secrets that changed me from a 97-pound flat-chested weakling into a husky fellow who twice won the title of "World's Most Perfectly Developed man" against all comers! And it shows how I can build you into an "Atlas Champion" the same way.

Are you underweight? I'll add pounds where they are needed! Are you fat in spots? I'll show you how to pare down to fighting trim.

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I've Got No Use At All for "Contraptions"

I haven't any need for contraptions that may strain your heart and other vital organs. I don't dose you or doctor you. **Dynamic Tension** is all I need. It's the natural, tested method for developing real men inside and out. It distributes added pounds of powerful muscles over your body, gets rid of surplus fat, and gives you the vitality, strength and pep that win you the admiration of every woman and the respect of any man.

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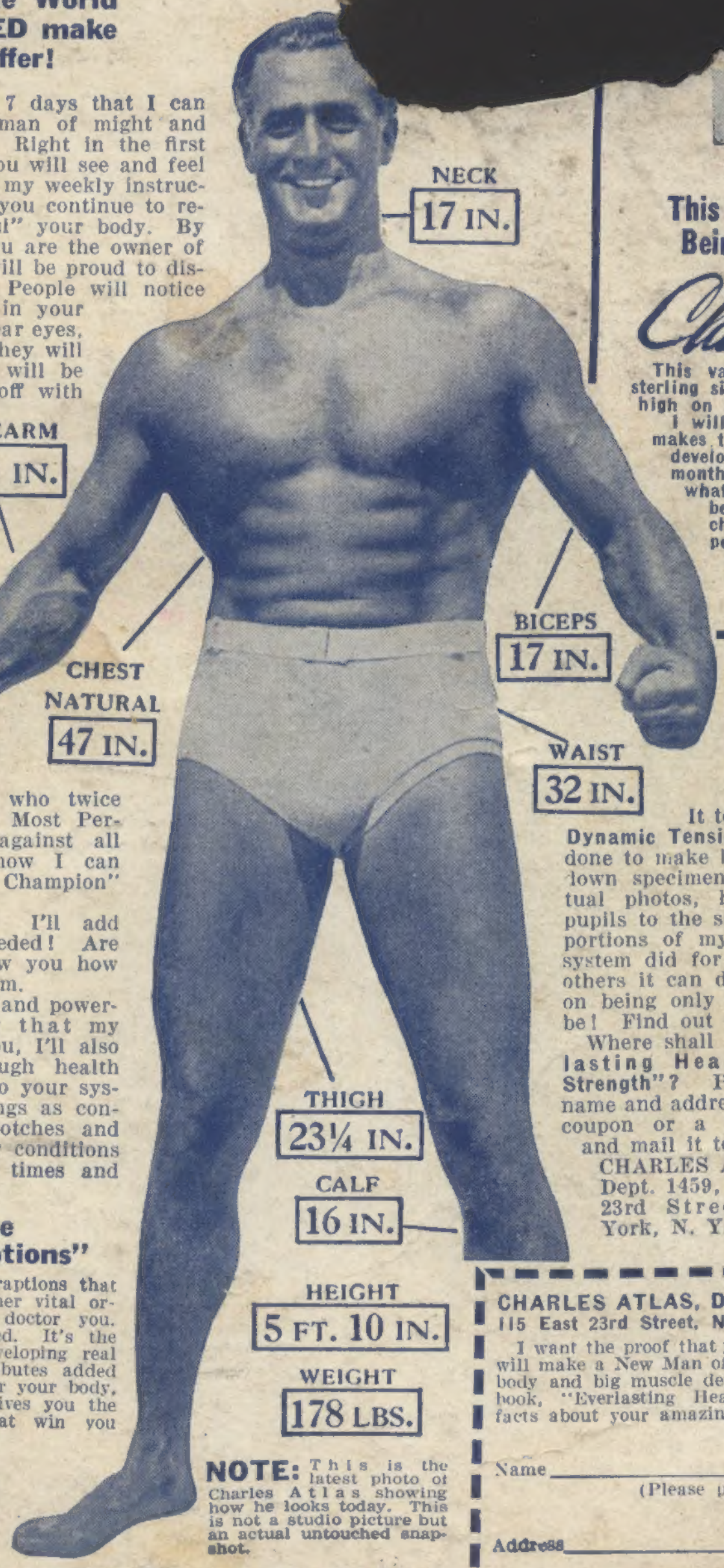

NOTE: This is the latest photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

This Sterling Silver Cup Being Given Away by Charles Atlas

This valuable cup, made of solid sterling silver, stands about 14 inches high on a black mahogany base. I will award it to my pupil who makes the most improvement in his development within the next three months. Therefore, no matter what your measurements may be now, you have an equal chance to win this cup for permanent possession — and with YOUR name engraved on it!

Get my free book by mailing coupon below!

48-PAGE BOOK FREE

It tells you all about my special **Dynamic Tension** method, and what it has done to make big-muscled men out of run-down specimens. It shows you, from actual photos, how I have developed my pupils to the same perfectly balanced proportions of my own physique. What my system did for me and these hundreds of others it can do for you too. Don't keep on being only half of the man you CAN be! Find out what I can do for you.

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MAIL COUPON FOR FREE BOOK NOW!

STOP THAT ITCHING AND SCRATCHING

According to the Government Health Bulletin 1927-28 at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

There are many other names given to this disease, but you can easily tell if you have it.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form and the skin cracks and peels. After a while the itching becomes intense and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

FOOT-ITCH
(ATHLETE'S FOOT)

Send Coupon-Don't Pay till Relieved

Beware of It Spreading

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

It has been said that this disease originated in the trenches, so some people call it Trench Foot. Whatever name you give it, however, the thing to do is to get rid of it as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.

Here's How to Treat It

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows that it takes 20 minutes of boiling to kill the germ, so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of treating Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. It peels off the infected skin and works its way deep into the tissue of the skin where the germ breeds.

Itching Stops Immediately

As soon as you apply H. F. you will find that the itching is immediately relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are well. Usually this takes from three to ten days, although in severe cases it may take longer or in mild cases less time.

H. F. will leave the skin soft and smooth. You will marvel at the quick way it brings you relief; especially if you are one of those who have tried for years to get rid of Athlete's Foot without success.

H. F. Sent on FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money, don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you we know that you will be glad to send us $1.00 for the treatment at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

Mail this Coupon

GORE PRODUCTS, INC., AF
807-Af Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a complete treatment for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better I will send you $1.00. If I am not entirely satisfied I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

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